



Exemplarity and its Limits in the Hagiographical Corpus of Thomas of Cantimpré

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Prof. Amy Hollywood

Rachel Smith

Exemplarity and its Limits in Thomas of Cantimpré's Hagiographical Corpus

Abstract

This dissertation examines the hagiographical corpus of the Dominican preacher Thomas of Cantimpré (c. 1201–1270), a critical early respondent to the burgeoning women's religious movement in the Southern Low Countries. Writing at a time when both lay and religious spirituality were being radically refigured in light of new organizational structures and devotional practices, Thomas's hagiographical corpus reflects the diversity of vocational possibilities available for women and men in this period at a time of great religious experimentation and innovation. Using historical, literary, and theological methods, the dissertation examines the ways in which Thomas's *vitae* struggle with the question of how lay and religious, male and female readers might, in Thomas's words, "take up" the different kinds of figures Thomas offers as models for practice and objects of devotion. Each of the *vitae* offer unique solutions to this question even as they represent different sorts of persons as exemplary.

An important assumption governing the dissertation is that hagiography is a vital part of the spiritual and theological tradition of Christianity. Thomas's *vitae*, I argue, attempt to articulate a theology of exemplarity in order to address the issue of what constitutes sanctity, who can become a saint, and by what means sanctity is attained. For Thomas, exemplarity is animated by theological notions of incarnation and scriptural revelation. Christ, as manifest in his life and in the words of scripture, is the great *exemplum* for embodied lives. For each of Thomas's saints, Christ is both the singular figure who saves and the one in whom the saint participates, raising the question of how

the individual human being embodies and exemplifies Christ's singularity. Thomas's Lives will be shown, in the course of their narratives, to illumine the tension between the singularity of Christ and its repetition in the saintly figures represented in the *vitae* and the readers of those *vitae*. Exploration of this tension reveals great richness in Thomas's works, showing that Thomas's narrative voice often speaks doubly within a single *vita*, thematizing the limits and possibilities of exemplarity and its hagiographical representation.

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Introduction

Incarnation and Example

What does it mean to be a saint? Who can become one? By what means is sanctity attained? These questions were central to laypersons and religious leaders in the thirteenth-century Southern Low Countries who lived at a time of great religious innovation and experimentation. This dissertation will examine the ways in which key questions about the holy life—what constitutes it, how it should be represented, and how different audiences might act in light of the example of the saints—are addressed in the hagiographical corpus of the thirteenth-century Augustinian canon-turned-Dominican, Thomas of Cantimpré (c. 1200-c.1270). Thomas's *vitae*, I argue, attempt to articulate a theology of exemplarity as an answer. Exemplarity is a quality of “being fit to serve as a model or pattern for imitation” or a “warning about what *not* to do.”¹ For Thomas, exemplarity is animated by theological notions of incarnation and scriptural revelation. Christ, as manifest in his life and in the words of scripture, is the great *exemplum* for embodied lives. For each of Thomas's saints, Christ is both the singular figure who saves and the one in whom the saint participates, raising the question of how the individual human being embodies and exemplifies Christ's singularity. Thomas's Lives will be shown, in the course of their narratives, to illumine the tension between the singularity of Christ and its repetition in the saintly figures represented in the *vitae* and in the readers of those *vitae*. Exploration of this tension reveals great richness in Thomas's works, showing how Thomas's narrative voice often speaks doubly within a single *vita*,

¹ *OED*, vol. 5, p. 525, “exemplarity.”

thematizing the limits and possibilities of exemplarity and its representation within a hagiography. In Chapter two, I consider this tension as Thomas represents the body of Christina the Astonishing, whose imitation of Christ is so literal it encroaches on the dogmatically declared singularity of Christ, thereby making her a monstrous horror to spectators who are left uncertain about how to respond—an uncertainty that the narrative dramatizes and probes. In Chapter three, I again explore the problem of credibility, here asking how Thomas understands the status of hagiographical texts that portray the saint so assimilated to God that she becomes impossible to believe, even as her incredible deeds prove her sanctity. As a solution to this rhetorical conundrum, I argue that Thomas, employing a hermeneutical strategy derived from *Augustine's De Doctrina Christiana*, asks readers to approach Lutgard's *vita* as they would scriptural revelation. In Chapter four, I examine the devotional mode of reading the saint's *life* articulated by Thomas as the means by which the reader might *become* the saint who has, already, become scripture. In Chapter five, I argue that Thomas treats his writing of the life of an ecstatic saint as a means of enabling his own ecstatic encounter with God. In each chapter, I will show the ways in which Thomas problematizes acts of mimesis, thematizing the limits and possibilities of the saint's, reader's, and author's capacity to imitate the divine life, whether in word or deed.

Thomas's theology does not proceed by way of abstract questions and answers but adapts and reconstitutes older theological traditions of Augustine, Cassian, Bernard of Clairvaux, and William of Saint-Thierry within the particular historical narratives of contemporary lives. The saintly example embodies and recapitulates Christ's example. The *vitae*, in turn, solicit the imitation (or, in the case of the exemplar-as-warning, a

change of behavior) of readers who are asked to respond by means of not only an intellectual assent but also an affective and bodily *participation* in the saint's story.

The dissertation revisits the question of how the didacticism of Thomas's hagiographical narratives functions. As I will discuss further in this introduction, scholars have tended to read Thomas's *vitae* as important sources of anti-heretical propaganda and as texts that attempt to teach the penitential program of Lateran IV. These analyses are an accurate assessment of his Dominican vocation. However, such readings have the disadvantage of tending to reduce the entirety of Thomas's corpus, as well as each individual *life*, to an expression of a prior dogmatic program. This type of historiography flattens the diversity within his body of work and elides the differences among the *vitae*, which represent radically different vocational paths for very different sorts of people—male and female, lay and clerical, beguine, nun, and tertiary—by means of different rhetorical strategies. The dissertation considers the entirety of Thomas's hagiographical corpus in an attempt to demonstrate its diversity, pays close attention to the narrative and rhetorical strategies by which Thomas portrays individual subjects in order to make them compelling figures for readers. These rhetorical strategies and the ways in which Thomas understands their effects are, I will show, intrinsically dependent on notions of theological language—the representation of the holy—and an understanding of the *devotional* response of the reader. The didactic nature of Thomas's texts cannot, then, be understood apart from his theology of exemplarity. Furthermore, the ways Thomas reflects on the process of writing, asking within his works what it is to believe in his story or to act on such belief, demonstrates that he does not build his authority with recourse to a monologic message, but rather enlists the audience in a process of reflection upon their

response to his works.

Thomas of Cantimpré: A Summary of his Life and Literary Activity

Thomas of Cantimpré was born in the village of Bellinghen, near Brussels, in the year 1200 or 1201, to a noble family.² The village was situated on the border between Flemish and French-speaking communities, under the jurisdiction of the dukes of the Brabant, and within the diocese of Cambrai. The bilingualism of the area around the place of Thomas's birth helps explain the ease with which he would later travel in his role as itinerant preacher and confessor in the Low Countries, speaking both his native Flemish (*theutonicus*) and French (*lingua romana*).³ He also had great facility with Latin, provided by his extensive education. The entirety of his literary oeuvre is composed in that language. In the year 1206, he was sent to the French-language cathedral school at Cambrai, where he remained for eleven years, though he would later profess at the Flemish-speaking Dominican house at Louvain.⁴ Thomas recounts that these early efforts to form him into an acceptable candidate for the priesthood—including his education and

² For the chronology of Thomas's life, unless otherwise cited, I am drawing on Robert Sweetman's dissertation, "Dominican Preaching in the Low Countries 1240-1260: *Materiae Praedicabiles* in the *Liber de natura rerum* and *Bonum universale de apibus* of Thomas of Cantimpré," unpublished dissertation, University of Toronto, 1988. Sweetman reconstructed many of the dates from autobiographical notes in Thomas's works, and also depends upon Alfred Deboutte, "Thomas van Cantimpré. Zijn opleiding te Kamerijk," *Ons geestlijke erf* 56 (1982) for an account of Thomas's education at Cambrai (rather than Liège, as posited by H. Platelle and R. Godding) and Deboutte's "Thomas van Cantimpré, als auditor van Albertus Magnus," *Ons Geestlijke erf* 58 (1984), pp. 192-209. The dates of significant events in Thomas's life unfortunately rely to a great extent on conjecture.

³ Barbara Newman, "Introduction" in *Thomas of Cantimpré, The Collected Saints' Lives*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), p. 4.

⁴ Jennifer Carpenter, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: The vitae of the mulieres religiosae of Liège*, unpublished dissertation, University of Toronto, 1997, p. 135, n. 67.

his “orientation towards a celibate life”—occurred because his father, a Brabantine knight, made his confession to a hermit while on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The hermit told him that his sins were of such gravity that his only hope lay in devoting a son to the priesthood. This son would, in time, offer particularly efficacious prayers on his behalf.⁵ Thomas’s priestly vocation was thus inspired by the necessity of an intercessory religious role that he would later underscore as a component of the piety of the *mulieres religiosae* whose *vitae* he wrote.

While still a student at Cambrai, “before he had reached fifteen years,” Thomas heard James of Vitry (d. 1240) preach either the Albigensian Crusade (1213) or the Crusade against the Saracens in the Holy Land (1214). This encounter was formative. As he later recounted in the *Supplement to the Life of Marie d’Oignies*, “I was happy just at the sound of your name.” Ever after, he bore a “special love” for James.⁶

James had visited the Low Countries while still a theology student in Paris, some time between 1203 and 1211.⁷ According to Thomas, James had been drawn to Liège by the fame of Marie of Oignies (c. 1177-1213). Marie was a woman who had renounced her marriage in order to live in poverty and chastity, first at a leprosarium at Willambroux, then as a lay sister with a community of women attached to the

⁵ *Les Exemples du “Livre des abeilles”: Une Vision Médiévale*, trans. by Henri Platelle (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), Bk. 2.203, p. 236. Henceforth *BUA*.

⁶ Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis, Supplementum*, ed. by A. Raysse, in AASS 23 June, V, pp. 572-81. English translation by Hugh Feiss OSB in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*, ed. Anneke Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006). Henceforth *VMO-S*. Bk. 4, ch. 27.

⁷ Jennifer Carpenter, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, p. 124.

Augustinian canons at St. Nicholas of Oignies, south of Nivelles.⁸ Marie herself persuaded James to join the community of Regular canons at Oignies. He would go on to write her very influential *vita*, *The Life of Marie d'Oignies*,⁹ completing it by 1215, less than two years after her death. It recounts not only the beguine's piety and the novel religiosity of the *mulieres religiosae* in Liège, but also the intimate relationship that arose between Marie and James. James depicts Marie as his inspiration and guide in the art of preaching. The *vita* is primarily an account of James's personal experience of Marie, and the stories that compose it—many of them purportedly from Marie's own mouth—have their source in these experiences, confirming James's claim that he recorded “what I have seen and come to know, for a large part from experience.”¹⁰

Brenda Bolton notes that James was inspired by late antique figures such as Augustine and Jerome who oversaw groups of wealthy women in the ascetic life. Imitating Jerome's efforts to spread the heroic feats of women such as Melania (in contrast with the general perfidy of women expounded upon by Jerome) through pamphlets and hagiographies, James understood his own hagiographical work as providing models—*exempla*—for a new kind of sanctity. What he saw in Liège among ascetic women, particularly Marie, he believed to be as significant as the movements of

⁸ *VMO-S* Bk. 1, ch. 1. On the history of the community at Oignies, see Ernst McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture: With Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New York: 1954; 1969), pp. 8-19.

⁹ Jacques de Vitry, *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis*, in AASS, 23 June, XXV, pp. 547-72. English translation by Margot H. King in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*, ed. Anneke Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), pp. 33-128. Henceforth *VMO*.

¹⁰ *VMO*, Prologue 11. “[Q]uae vidimus et novimus, et ex magna parte per experientiam didicimus.” On this personal and experiential emphasis, see Jennifer Carpenter, “Between Heaven and Earth,” pp. 125-127.

late antiquity: practicing a similarly austere life, these women were possibly the “new mothers of the church.”¹¹

Perhaps inspired by James’s vocation as an Augustinian canon, in 1217 Thomas entered the Victorine House of Notre Dame de Cantimpré, just outside Cambrai. The small foundation had been established in 1177 by the charismatic John of Cantimpré (c. 1155—c. 1205/09), the subject of the first of Thomas’s hagiographies. In 1222 or 1223 Thomas was ordained a priest, after which he began work on the *Life of Abbot John of Cantimpré*. Thomas suddenly stopped work on the *vita* in 1228 for reasons that remain unclear. He completed it in 1270 at the request of Anselm, the Abbot of the canons of Cantimpré.¹²

The *Life* (VJC) demonstrates Thomas’s early fascination with the *vita apostolica* and the importance of preaching and the active life in Thomas’s conception of male sanctity. It depicts the itinerant adventures of John, whom Thomas represents as a peculiarly efficacious preacher. John proclaims his message by means of his deeds as well as words, both declaring and living a life of rigorous penance (while, unlike Thomas’s female subjects, avoiding debilitating austerity), preaching compassion for the urban poor who had been “oppressed” by “usury and unjust profit-taking,” while also railing against the heretics of Cambrai.¹³ The *vita* also documents John’s efforts to found

¹¹ Brenda Bolton, “*Vitae Matrum*: A Further Aspect of the Frauenfrage,” *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), p. 254.

¹² *Thomas of Cantimpré, Vita Ionnis Cantimpratensis*, ed. Robert Godding, “Une oeuvre inédite de Thomas de Cantimpré: la ‘Vita Ioannis Cantimpratensis,’” in *Revue d’Histoire Ecclésiastique* 76 (1981), pp. 241-316. English translation by Barbara Newman, in *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints’ Lives* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), pp. 57-124. Henceforth VJC.

¹³ VJC II.12.

the community of canons at Cantimpré and have it recognized by the abbey of Saint-Victor (a task finally accomplished in 1183) and includes biographies of the first men to gather around John as well as the women who lived at Prémy, a foundation also established by John, which was located next to the male house.¹⁴ Thomas emphasizes John's conversion of the rural nobility,¹⁵ to whom he preached against violence, greed, and usury, as well as his work with urban masses, for whom he staged elaborate performances of restitution and penance in order to inspire the crowd's conversion. Thomas elaborately narrates these performances, attempting to recreate on the page the exemplary and persuasive power of John's initial performance. The *vita* includes stories of the ritual suicide of a penitent named Alard who was a moneylender and a priest,¹⁶ and the theatrical restitution of ill-gotten gains by the nobleman John of Montmirail.¹⁷

During his years as an Augustinian canon, Thomas began to compile material for his encyclopedia, *De Natura Rerum (DNR)*.¹⁸ Dividing his work into nineteen sections addressing humans, animals, plants, water, stones, metals, astronomy, astrology, and meteorology, Thomas claimed the work was inspired by Augustine's observation in *De Doctrina Christiana* that a reference work of strange creatures, animals, stones, and "anything that has roots" mentioned in scripture would be useful to scriptural exegetes in

¹⁴ *VJC* I.14; I.15.

¹⁵ *VJC* II.8b.

¹⁶ *VJC* II.13.

¹⁷ *VJC* II.8b.

¹⁸ Thomas de Cantimpré, *Liber de natura rerum von Thomas Cantimpratensis* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1973). Henceforth *DNR*.

understanding figurative expressions used in scriptural analogies.¹⁹ Robert Sweetman argues that Thomas interpreted this call as pertaining not only to exegesis proper but as a means to provide scintillating *materia praedicabiles*, though M. Michèle Mulchahey notes that the work was also intended for use by the laity and was translated into German and Flemish within Thomas's lifetime.²⁰ According to Sweetman, Thomas intended preachers to use the *DNR* in order to create interesting digressions so that, "wandering from the trail of Scripture, by putting aside for a time the eloquence of prophets, preachers could use the eyes of faith to evoke the witness of creatures to awaken brutish minds, using novelties to caress ears no longer moved by what they heard and what was impressed directly upon them from Scripture."²¹ The *DNR* thus provided material that veiled the moral message of sermons, making them more palatable and memorable, "fool[ing] hearers into listening in spite of themselves."²²

Thomas's based his use of the nature of creatures as sources for moral teaching on an exemplarist understanding of creation. In the Prologue, Thomas argues that God's

¹⁹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2.59-61; *DNR*, 19.7.8-12, p. 414; Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 88.

²⁰ Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 93; M. Michèle Mulchahey "First the bow is bent in study"...: *Dominican Education before 1350* (Toronto: PIMS, 1998), p. 467. Mulchahey implies that she is less sure of Thomas's intention that the work was consciously designed as a collection of *praedicabilia*, and was initially concerned more with scientific knowledge rather than morals drawn from this information by analogy (*Ibid.*, p. 466, n. 204). The fact that the treatise explicitly moralizes, however, supports Sweetman's contention.

²¹ *DNR*, Prol. 90-96.5. Trans. by Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 95. "Hiis ergo scriptis si quis studium adhibuerit, ad argumenta fidei et correctiones morum integumentis mediis sufficientiam reperiet, ut interdum predicator quasi e vestigio scripturarum apte digresso cessantibus eloquiis prophetarum ad evigilationem brutarum mentium oculata fide creaturarum adducat testes, ut si quem sepius audita de scripturis et inculcata non movent, saltem nova in ore suo pigritantium aures demulceant."

²² Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 95.

artistic activity is revealed in creation. All creatures thus reflect the creator, and by virtue of this common source, the patterns of all creaturely natures provide analogies for moral human life, though as animate beings are particularly appropriate, these are the primary focus of the work.²³ The description of the nature of a thing refers not only to that created entity but also to the human microcosm. The work is, then, a *reductio omnium creaturarum ad hominem*.²⁴ Thomas's method for obtaining material for preaching from the world of nature was first to identify *significantiae*—analogies between nonhuman and human behavior—and then draw out the moral implications of those analogies for human beings, creating *moralitates*, “moral judgments in the form of exhortation or...chastisement.”²⁵ For example, Thomas wrote that the sea urchin, though very small, was so strong that it could stop the movement of a 200-foot ship if it attached itself to the hull. Though incredible, he wrote, this was a natural fact witnessed by the best authorities. He then addressed the devil, asking, “what would seem more unbelievable, that a Virgin should conceive and bear a child...or that a six-inch fish should be able to keep a ship at bay even against the wind's forceful blasts?”²⁶ The incredible nature of the sea urchin was thus compared to incredible doctrine, authorities on the natural world to theological authorities, thereby obtaining external support for scriptural claims.

²³ DNR, 19.7.8-12.414. Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 97.

²⁴ Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 139.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 106.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 118. DNR 7.31.12-17.260. “Dic mihi, flagitiosime serpens, quid incredibilius videretur: aut virginem sine virili semine concipere et parere, aut pisciculum semipedalem adhesionem tantum tantam molem navis contra validissimos flatus retinere posse immobilem?”

Some time between his ordination and becoming a Dominican in 1232, Thomas received a commission to hear confessions as the bishop's vicar in the diocese of Cambrai, an event Robert Sweetman posits as occurring in 1228-9.²⁷ The authority of this office entailed the power to absolve even those sins considered too grave or complex for the parish clergy to address, including, Barbara Newman notes, illicit sexual offences.²⁸ Thomas found these confessions a test of his own celibacy. The difficulties he experienced led him to seek the counsel of Lutgard of Aywières (1182-1246), who had a prophetic vision confirming his vocation as a confessor and promising constant divine protection while performing his office. Thomas writes that her words enabled him to continue with the work.²⁹

Inspired perhaps by James of Vitry's relationship with Marie of Oignies and by his salutary encounter with Lutgard, Thomas turned his literary interests to depicting the lives of *mulieres religiosae*, writing the *Supplement to the Life of Marie of Oignies* from 1229 to 1232 and *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, which he began during his final years as an Augustinian canon and completed after professing as a Dominican at the priory in Louvain in 1232. Thomas claims to have written the *Supplement (VMO-S)* in

²⁷ Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 12.

²⁸ Barbara Newman, "Introduction," in *Thomas of Cantimpré*, p. 5.

²⁹ This encounter is described in the *Vita Lutgardis*, 2.38 from *Thomas of Cantimpré, Vita Lutgardis Aquiriensis*, ed. by G. Henschen, in AASS, 16 June, III, pp. 187-209. English translation by Margot King and Barbara Newman in *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints' Lives*, pp. 211-296. Henceforth *VLA*. It is also addressed in the *BUA* 2.30.3, p. 321. In the *VLA* Thomas writes that at the time of his writing, Lutgard's prophecy had remained true for 16 years, which places this event between 1228 and 1230. See Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 12.

order to add material to James of Vitry's *Life of Marie of Oignies*.³⁰ James, Thomas writes, had left out much of the miraculous material lest he "tire his readers with excess, or lest the incomprehensible greatness of her miracles become an odour of death rather than life in the hearts of unbelievers."³¹ The text is a *liber miraculorum*, offering accounts of miracles performed by Marie that were not included by James in the *VMO*. The *vita* focuses on those episodes that involved James, becoming, in effect, a biography of *James* as told through his relationship with Marie. The lengthy final four chapters consist of a *querela* addressed to James, who at the time of the text's writing had been long absent from Liège, which he left in order to occupy the position first of archbishop of Tusculum, then of cardinal. According to Thomas, James's move was against Marie's wishes and a betrayal of the apostolic ideals he had professed. Marie's *Supplement* thus becomes James's anti-hagiography, painting a portrait of what Thomas considers his fall from grace by means of elaborate comparisons between James's lost idealism and current materialism and ambition.

The Life of Christina the Astonishing (VCM) is Thomas's most unconventional and adventurous *vita*.³² Like Marie, Christina (c. 1150-1224) was an uncloistered laywoman who developed a novel form of piety, though unlike Marie, Christina did not participate in communal life, except for an attenuated attachment to the Benedictine nuns of St. Catharine's in her home village of St. Truiden. As Brenda Bolton notes, Christina

³⁰ *VMO-S*, Prologue.

³¹ *VJC*, II.8b; *VMO-S*, Prologue. Thomas quotes the passage from the *VJC* in the Prologue to the *Supplement*.

³² *Thomas of Cantimpré, Vita Christianae mirabilis*, ed. by J. Pinius, in *AASS*, 24 July, V, pp. 637-60. English translation by Margot King and Barbara Newman in *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints' Lives*, pp. 127-160. Henceforth *VCM*.

was “claimed by Benedictines, Cistercians, and Premonstratensians alike, but...in reality was not attached to any religious order nor to a beguine group.”³³ A woman who is likely Christina appears in James’s extended Prologue to the *Life of Marie of Oignies*, where he describes a woman who “obtained from the Lord that she would endure purgatory, living in this world in her body,” being “afflicted for a long time by the Lord, so that sometimes she rolled herself in the fire, and sometimes in the winter she remained for lengthy periods in icy water and at other times she was driven (*cogebatur*) to enter the tombs of the dead.”³⁴ Thomas narrates Christina’s death at a young age from “too much contemplation” and her encounter with God at the divine throne, writing that Christina was resurrected following an agreement with God to return to the flesh and “undergo there the punishment (*agere poenitentiam*) of an immortal soul in a mortal body without damage to it.”³⁵ Through these sufferings, God promised that Christina would deliver many souls from the horrors of purgatory and would furthermore become a living *exemplum*, teaching those still alive to “turn aside from their sins.” What, Thomas writes, did “Christina cry out during her entire life except to do penance (*agere poenitentiam*) and be ready at every hour? This she taught with many words, with tears, with lamentations and boundless cries, and with the example (*exemplo*) of her life.”³⁶

³³ Brenda Bolton, “*Vitae Matrum*: A Further Aspect of the Frauenfrage,” *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), p. 260.

³⁴ *VMO*, Pr. 8.

³⁵ *VCM*, 7.

³⁶ *VCM*, 56. “Vigilate ergo: quia nescitis diem neque horam, qua Dominus vester venturus sit. Et quid aliud in omni vita sua Christina clamavit, nisi poenitentiam agere, & paratos esse homines omni hora? Hoc verbis multis, hoc fletibus, hoc ejulatibus, hoc clamoribus

Christina's *vita* thus continues many of the themes of John's *Life*, particularly its emphasis on preaching, teaching, the active life among the laity, and conversion. In this case, however, the preacher is female and the primary means of her pedagogy is not language but her marvelous body and the horror it inspires in onlookers.

In 1238, Thomas was sent to St. Jacques in Paris for two years for further study. While there he completed work on the *De Natura Rerum*.³⁷ Returning to Louvain in 1240, Thomas stopped at Ypres, having long desired (*cupiebam*) to meet a fellow Dominican, Zeger (Siger) of Lille,³⁸ a powerful presence among the Dominicans of Lille and Ypres and a friend of the Countess Johanna of Constantinople.³⁹ At this meeting, Zeger told Thomas about his spiritual daughter, Margaret of Ypres (1216-1237), a laywoman from a bourgeois family in Ypres, and asked him to write her *vita*, probably having heard about Thomas's reputation as a hagiographer. Thomas returned a draft of the work to Zeger for correction in late 1240 and completed it around 1243.⁴⁰ More than communicating any great impression Margaret made upon him, the text comes across as a

infitis, hoc exemplo vitæ plus docuit, plus clamavit, quam de aliquo præcedentium vel subsequentium scripto vel relatione percepimus."

³⁷ Robert Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 13. On the history and development of Dominican education, including at St Jacques in Paris and the four *studia generalia* in Cologne, Oxford, Montpellier, and Bologna see Mulchahey, "First the bow is bent in study," ch. 5. Mulchahey argues that the education someone like Thomas would have received would have been centered on a curriculum that served the ends of pastoral care, rather than simply reproducing a Dominican version of secular university education, though the term *studium generale* was adopted from the secular context (p. 352-3).

³⁸ Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita Margarete de Ypres*, in "Les Frères Prêcheurs et le mouvement dévot en Flandres au XIIIe siècle," ed. G. Meersseman, *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, 18 (1948), pp. 106-30. Hereafter *VMY*.

³⁹ *VMY*, Prologue. Jennifer Carpenter, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, p. 162.

⁴⁰ Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 14.

gift of love to his fellow Dominican, an example of what Janet Halley calls a “homotextual” relation in which a male writer referred, responded, and projected desire upon other men by writing about a woman.⁴¹ The *vita* is addressed to Zeger, whom he calls *karissimus* three times in the short Prologue.

The relationship between Margaret and Zeger structures the text. Thomas refers to him as Margaret’s “spiritual father,” and for much of the *vita*, Zeger holds the position that Christ occupies in Thomas’s other Lives. Thus, while Lutgard’s conversion, we are told, was effected by a beautiful Christ who appeared and offered Lutgard a heavenly marriage, it was Zeger who converted Margaret. Zeger saw the young woman of eighteen in church and knew by a “divine instinct” (*divino instictu*) that she was a “vessel of election” (*vas electionis*).⁴² He preached to her and she was instantly converted, taking up a life of chastity and devotion while remaining in her mother’s home.⁴³

Aware of the suspicion such intimacy between a friar and a young woman would inspire, Thomas has Margaret articulate anxiety about too-close a relationship and the divine sanction for it in order to head off inevitable critiques. Margaret, Thomas writes,

⁴¹ Sheila Fisher and Janet Halley, eds. *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), p. 4.

⁴² *VLA* I.2-3; *VMY*, ch. 6, p. 109.

⁴³ Margaret’s practices were said to include observation of the canonical hours, daily recitation of “four hundred Our Fathers, and as many Hail Marys and...the same number of genuflections...and fifty items from the Psalter.” Meersseman argues that the fifty items from the Psalter were not Psalms but fifty hail Marys, which made up the “Psalter of the Virgin Mary” (“Les Frères Prêcheurs,” pp. 73-76; also noted in Carpenter, *Between Heaven and Earth*, p. 163 n. 160). According to Meersseman, Margaret’s practices were essentially the same as the primitive rule of the brothers and sisters of penitence, and she was, in effect, a Dominican tertiary.

worried that she loved Zeger too fervently. She asked Christ, whom she assured she loved above all others (*te...super omnia diligo*), whether she could continue the relationship, for

[m]utual love and frequent conversation between a man and a woman seem suspicious (*suspecta*) to our superiors, I ask you through your matchless humility that you mercifully show me, your handmaid, whether I will incur any loss of your love (*amor*) by loving (*dilectio*) and conversing with your servant. I solemnly promise that if I find anything against your love, I will never speak to him again.⁴⁴

God immediately responded by confirming Margaret's substitution of divine for human authority, saying, "Do not fear to trust him in my stead." Thomas emphasizes the veracity of the divine response with triple alliteration, almost daring the reader to doubt him:

"Verus Deus, et vera veritas ipse est."

Despite his desire to confirm Zeger's vocation as spiritual director, affirm Dominican pastoral relationships with *mulieres religiosae* (for which the *vita* acts as an apology), and offer Zeger a worthy account of a woman so important to him, Thomas struggles to portray Margaret as possessing the gravitas that he saw in Marie, Christina, and Lutgard. Margaret remains a *juvencula*.⁴⁵ This could in part be attributed to her death at the age of 24, suggesting an accurate documentation of the life of a "rebellious teen."⁴⁶ Furthermore, Thomas deploys her simple, precocious devotion as a rhetorical device to shame the proud monks and nuns that Thomas presumes will read her *vita*, thereby using

⁴⁴ VMY, ch. 25, p. 119. "At quia mutua dilectio et frequens collocutio viri cum femina maioribus nostris suspecta videtur, rogo te...si in dilectione et collocutione servi tui damnum aliquid tui amoris incurram, et ego spondeo, si tue caritati adversum invenero, numquam ei postea loquar."

⁴⁵ VMY Prologue.

⁴⁶ Barbara Newman, "Introduction," in *Thomas of Cantimpré*, p. 37.

lay piety as a corrective to the piety of professed religious.⁴⁷ The depiction of Margaret's naïve youthfulness is slowly assimilated to her remarkable frailty and weakness: Thomas describes Margaret as a young woman sustained in her extreme asceticism through bimonthly reception of the Eucharist, thus undertaking pious practices that would typically have been accessible only to monks and nuns.⁴⁸

However, the *vita* also represents the failure and limitations of lay piety. Margaret's devotion often seems a product of a literalism that misunderstands the practices she has read or been told about, practices that become comical in the exaggerated mode of her enactment of them. Thomas writes that her vow of chastity made her "unable to bear the sight of men": she goes so far as to ask her mother to remove a dishwasher, a boy "perhaps twelve years old," from the home, for "her spirit shrank from the presence of men so much that she quivered with alarm whenever she saw one"—excluding Zeger, of course.⁴⁹ Margaret's horror of men contrasts with the attitudes of Marie, Christina, and Lutgard, who each had profound relationships with men. Margaret's interpretation of the virtue of silence, in which she was "so praiseworthy that she surpassed...many cloistered monks and nuns," translated awkwardly to a domestic setting, causing her mother to complain to Zeger that she hardly spoke to them. He thus ordered her to talk to her mother and sisters after eating, "for as long as it took to recite

⁴⁷ *VMY* ch. 17. Thomas addresses "contemplative" men, powerful women, and "strong and bearded men" whom he considers weak and effeminate when compared to Margaret's strength.

⁴⁸ *VMY* ch. 11. Dyan Elliott argues that Thomas believed that Margaret died from her chastity, which he thought led to a disturbance of her womb, rather than any other of her austerities. Elliott understands Thomas's constant protestations that her chaste life was not the cause of her illness and death to be evidence of that very anxiety (private conversation, July 2011).

⁴⁹ *VMY*, ch. 12.

the Seven Psalms.” Afterward, she would “slump down against the wall,” her face and hands turning red. If conversations were burdensome, she would cry or conveniently fall into a trance.⁵⁰ When her mother complained she did no work to help the household, Margaret would take up a “distaff or some such thing” to “keep the peace” and then “fall into an ecstasy.”⁵¹ One of the most prominent miracles in the *life* occurred when Margaret, in a state of ecstasy but seeking to “look as if she had done something useful and constructive on a day she had devoted to prayer,” broke a number of eggs—the family’s only food—only to have them divinely restored.⁵²

Alongside what might seem a satirical representation of a young woman’s enthusiastic piety, Margaret’s *vita* contains many of the same themes and language identical to that which dominate the later *Vita Lutgardis*. Margaret, Thomas claims, “never relaxed the vigilance of her mind to commit any mortal sin,”⁵³ even as, after exchanging hearts with Christ, “no temptation of the flesh nor the smallest unclean thought...discompose[d Lutgard’s] mind even for a moment.” Likewise, both women had an early experience of divine things before they acquired spiritual understanding, experiences that Thomas describes with verbs of sensible knowledge. Thus, when reading the Psalter, Margaret fell into an ecstasy in which, although she did not know the Lord (*necdum cognoverat Dominum*), for he had not yet been revealed to her (*nec umquam ei*

⁵⁰ *VMY* ch. 13.

⁵¹ *VMY*, ch. 14.

⁵² *VMY*, ch. 15.

⁵³ *VMY*, I.1 “numquam eam ad aliquod mortale intentum animum relaxasse.” *VLA* I.12 “ut nec tentatio carnis, aut turpis saltem cogitatio, mentem ejus ad momenti spatium perturbaret.”

fuerat revelatum), she saw (*vidit*) Jesus, who placed a golden crown on her head in reward for her vow of chastity. The young Lutgard, “although she did not yet have direct knowledge” of the Lord (*necdum cognosceret Dominum*) for he had not yet been revealed to her (*nec enim ei tunc in aliquo fuerat revelatus*), was able to “sense interiorly, she knew not what” of the divine (*sentiebat interius nescio quid divini*).⁵⁴ In contrast, Margaret ran immediately to Zeger for confirmation of her vision. Both women transferred their *affectus* from a human suitor to the new spouse, Jesus.⁵⁵ Both are called “simple dove”⁵⁶ and compared to St. Agnes, echoing the words of her *vita* of being “taken by another lover,” Christ.⁵⁷ Margaret’s *vita* thus provided Thomas with much of the language and imagery that he would use in Lutgard’s *life*, though to very different effect.

Thomas began the *Life of Lutgard of Aywières (VLA)*, his longest and most complex hagiographical effort, some time following Lutgard’s death in 1246, completing it in 1248. Lutgard was born in 1182 of a noblewoman and a middle-class man in Tongeren, a Flemish town in the northern part of Liège. At approximately twelve years of age, Lutgard entered the monastery of St. Catherine’s in St. Truiden—the same community with which Christina *mirabilis* was associated—and was eventually made prioress, an act that compelled her to seek entrance to the Cistercian monastery of

⁵⁴ *VMY*, I.8; *VLA* I.1.

⁵⁵ *VMY*, I.7; *VLA* I.2.

⁵⁶ *VMY* I.10; *VLA* I.3; 3.7.

⁵⁷ *VMY*, 5 & 55; *VLA*, I.2-3.

Aywières in 1206, when she was twenty-four years old.⁵⁸ On Christina's advice, she transferred to the French-speaking Aywières rather than the Flemish Herkenrode, where she forever remained "miraculously" unable to learn French, thus preventing her from suffering the institutional honor of being made abbess of any of the newly forming Cistercian monasteries in the region.⁵⁹

The *vita* was composed at the request of Hadewijch, abbess of the Cistercian monastery at Aywières.⁶⁰ For Thomas, however, it was also clearly a labor of love, written not only in exchange for a relic of Lutgard's finger, which the Abbess withheld until receipt of the *vita*, but also for the sake of what he called his *amor flagrantissimus* for Lutgard.⁶¹ Of all the Lives, the *Vita Lutgardis* is most marked by Thomas's autobiographical presence. It also contains a "gallery of remarkable characters" whom Lutgard knew, including Christina *mirabilis*,⁶² Mary of Oignies,⁶³ Innocent III (who visited Lutgard from purgatory where, he said, he would "be tortured by the most

⁵⁸ *VLA* I.20.

⁵⁹ *VLA* I.22.

⁶⁰ *VLA* Prologue.

⁶¹ *VLA* Prologue.

⁶² *VLA* I.22.

⁶³ *VLA* II.9.

atrocious punishments until the day of the Last Judgment”⁶⁴), and James of Vitry, with whom she was very close.⁶⁵

In her study of what she termed “mystical biography,” Simone Roisin included the *VLA* in the corpus of what she identified as a new Cistercian genre. These hagiographies, Roisin argued, arose in the “beguinal-Cistercian milieu” of the Low Countries in which the two currents of Cistercian and beguinal piety—the latter, according to Roisin, formed by a mingling of European spirituality with Eastern influences (Syrian, Palestinian, and Byzantine) brought to Liège by traders—flourished to create hagiographies that attended to their subject’s efforts to die to the world, a death cultivated by means of obedience to the Benedictine Rule, asceticism, and the search for union with God.⁶⁶ According to Roisin, the subjects of these hagiographies represent both genders and all economic classes, in stark contrast to older hagiographical traditions that represent primarily bishops, abbots, and royalty.⁶⁷ The authors deployed new representational strategies and novel models of sanctity and rhetorical structures in their attempts to narrativize new forms of religious life, describing the mystic saint with appropriate language, understanding the saint to be a theophany who requires an

⁶⁴ *VLA* II.7.

⁶⁵ *VLA* II.3. *Lettres de Jacques de Vitry*, 1160/1170-1240, ed. R.B.C. Huygens (Leiden: Brill, 1960), p. 79.

⁶⁶ Simone Roisin, *L’Hagiographie Cistercienne dans le diocèse de Liège au XIIIe siècle* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l’Université, 1947), p. 5, p. 274. Other mystical biographies treated by Roisin include the Lives of Beatrice of Nazareth, Ida of Val-des-Roses, Ida of Louvain, and Catharine of Parc-des-Dames.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-11.

apophatic text in order to do justice to her manifestation of divinity.⁶⁸ These saints were remarkable for their cultivation of the interior life; their *virtutes* were not thaumaturgical deeds of marvelous power but inward qualities of humility, charity, and chastity.⁶⁹ According to Roisin, external deeds were subordinated to the greater interest in spiritual growth and ecstatic or rapturous union, a centering in what Roisin calls the “mysticism” that arose from a fusion of Bernadine doctrine and the ascetic practices of the *mulieres religiosae*.

Indeed, the prologue to Lutgard’s *vita* frames the story with the Origenistic pattern of spiritual ascent, declaring that the *life* will be structured according to the *triplicem statum in anima*, namely, the states of the *inchoantium*, *proficientium*, and *perfectorum*. The *vita* charts the course of Lutgard’s gradual assimilation to the figure of the bride of the Song of Songs, documenting her ecstasies, unions with God, and the growth of her desire for him, while also describing her ascetical deeds. The *VLA* thus makes the trope of the bride of a Christ that appears briefly in the *VCM* and again in the *VMY* a dominant motif. Like Christina, Lutgard’s spiritual labor often takes the form of intercessory work for souls in purgatory. Unlike Christina, her interventions occur primarily by means of prayer and fasting rather than through shocking bodily performances of purgatorial punishments.

According to Roisin, Thomas’s hagiographical corpus demonstrates an increasing turn to the interior spiritual life, culminating in the *VLA*, which she considers his most mature work, written, she argues, under the influence of Goswin of Bossut—cantor at the

⁶⁸ Roisin, *L’Hagiographie Cistercienne*, p. 212.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Cistercian monastery of Villers and author of the *vitae* of Ida of Nivelles (d. 1231), the *conversus* Arnulf (d. 1231), and the monk of Villers, Abundus of Huy (d. 1239)—and of Lutgard herself, whom he termed his spiritual mother. Roisin traces the arc of Thomas’s hagiographical works arguing that the *Supplement* and Christina’s *vita* emphasize external wonders, Margaret’s *vita*, the ascetic virtues, while Lutgard’s *vita* emphasizes the mystical graces.⁷⁰ The trajectory Roisin outlines for Thomas’s career can have a teleological cast, implying that only with the *VLA* did Thomas create a spiritually mature work by virtue of his full exposure to Cistercian influence through which he learned to value interiority. Although Roisin’s analysis notes fundamental theological and thematic differences among Thomas’s *vitae*, it is important not to discount the narrative and theological sophistication of Thomas’s earlier works. As Thomas Grzebien argues, the “looser form” of Thomas’s *vitae* prior to the *VLA* mirrors the less structured nature of the religious lives adopted by his figures who demonstrated a “less patterned way to the top of the mystical mountain.”⁷¹ The rhetorical and theological differences among Thomas’s works are important indicators of his experimental spirit and the way in which his hagiographical corpus represents an evolving response to the religious diversity and innovation he encountered during his long career. The dissertation takes as a point of departure the theological nature of Thomas’s hagiography and the differences among his Lives, but it treats *all* of the *vitae* as sophisticated works of theology, not only the *VLA*,

⁷⁰ Simone Roisin, “La Méthode hagiographique de Thomas de Cantimpré,” in *Miscellanea Historica in Honorem Alberti de Meyer*, 2 vols (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l’Université, 1946), I, pp. 546-7.

⁷¹ Thomas Walter Grzebien III, *Penance, purgatory, mysticism, and miracles: The life, hagiography, and spirituality of Thomas of Cantimpré* (University of Notre Dame, unpublished dissertation, 1989), p. 375.

and extends consideration of Thomas's sources from Bernard of Clairvaux, whom Roisin primarily treats, to Augustine, Cassian, and William of Saint-Thierry.

Between 1248 and 1252, Thomas was sent to the new *studium generale* at Cologne for further education. There he sat under Albert the Great, likely at the time when Albert had taken up Aristotle's *libri naturales* for commentary.⁷² The two men had a common interest in natural philosophy, and for a long period of time Thomas's *DNR* was attributed to Albert.⁷³ By May 1263, Thomas finished working on the massive *Bonum universale de apibus*—which translates approximately as “the common good as taught by bees”—sent to Humbert of Romans, then Master-General of the Dominican order upon its completion.⁷⁴ The treatise, begun after 1256, represents the fruition of his 30 years of Dominican pastoral duties.⁷⁵ In the dedicatory letter, Thomas writes that he began the work in response to requests from his fellow Dominicans and that he was sending the work to Humbert following the latter's call at General Chapter for friars to collect accounts of events in which Dominicans played an important role.⁷⁶ Robert Sweetman argues that Thomas began the work as part of his duty as subprior of the

⁷² Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 14. Sweetman notes that the evidence for this time frame rests upon Thomas mentioning in the *BUA* that he was a student of Albert the Great when he was regent master of theology. While it has been suggested that Thomas sat under Albert between 1232 and 1237 in either Paris or the Cologne Priory, Sweetman argues that the title Thomas used for Albert suggests 1248-1252 when Albert was the regent master at the new *studium generale* in Cologne.

⁷³ M.M. Mulchahey, “*First the bow*,” p. 467.

⁷⁴ Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 15.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁷⁶ *BUA*, Prologue, p. 56.

Dominican house at Louvain (an office he held from 1246), which included the tasks of confessing, preaching, and watching over the friars in the priory.⁷⁷

The work contains a collection of *exempla* organized around the extended metaphor of the life of bees, elaborated from a chapter, Thomas explains, of *De Natura Rerum*.⁷⁸ He headlines each chapter with a statement about the natural history of the bee from the *DNR*, which he in turn relates to a quality or duty of the clergy or laity and illustrates with an *exemplum*. Book one concerns the lives of prelates (25 chapters) and book two, the lives of the laity (57 chapters). Thomas's profound interest in the events of his day is apparent in the treatise. Each chapter, he tells Humbert, provides *exempla aptata et appropriata* that ground the abstract lessons in "our times."⁷⁹ Thomas gathered the *exempla* from his extensive work as a confessor, preacher, and exorcist, and included material from his own life, his pastoral experience, and tales told to him by others. T. F. Crane argues that the *exempla* are almost entirely derived from historical anecdotes, containing very few commonplaces, as was typical of older collections.⁸⁰ Unlike one of

⁷⁷ Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 158.

⁷⁸ *BUA* Prologue, p. 56.

⁷⁹ *BUA* Prologue, p. 56.

⁸⁰ Jacques de Vitry, *The Exempla, or, Illustrative Stories from the Sermones vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. and trans. T. F. Crane (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1967 (1890), p. xci. Crane further notes that more than one hundred years later, Thomas's treatise would inspire a similar work by fellow-Dominican, Johannes Nider (b. 1380), though the ant would in this case take the place of the bee. Nider's *De formicarius* was written, he explains in the Prologue, in response to the sentiment that miracles and revelations were no longer manifest in Germany. Like Thomas, Nider writes that his treatise records contemporary instances of divine intervention that he had seen or heard of. These tales were organized according to the sixty qualities of the ant and are, unlike the *De apibus*, though like Gregory's *Dialogues* and Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum*, told through a dialogue between Piger, a dullard, and the master Theologus (p. xcii).

his predecessors in the genre, the Cistercian Caesarius of Heisterbach, Thomas uses personal anecdotes as material for his *exempla*, including the one described above concerning his entrance into religious life, departing from what Jean-Claude Schmitt identified as important to thirteenth-century *exempla* collections, namely the depersonalization of the figures, events, and places depicted in order that they may become universal types and circumstances.⁸¹ While Thomas writes in the dedicatory letter that he has removed the names of countries, cities, and towns to avoid confusion with individuals depicted in those places who are still alive, this is a false protestation. Thomas far more commonly identifies places and persons in the treatise than protects their anonymity.

While Crane terms these *exempla* “illustrative stories,” Sweetman holds that they are a form of *scientia experimentalis*, “units of human experience to which one could appeal to establish the actual existence of a given principle or conclusion.” Thus, the *exempla* do not function as doctrinal window dressing but carry an authority parallel to quotations from the Bible or Seneca, Thomas’s favorite philosopher. Furthermore, the *exempla* provide narratives of the human consequences and reactions—joy and horror—to virtue or vice, thus including the audience’s emotions in the work of persuasion, convincing “hearts to act in accord” with doctrinal norms.⁸² In this way, they are exhortative in the sense outlined by Gregory the Great, whose popular view is invoked by Humbert of Romans in his treatise, *Liber de dono timoris*: “according to Gregory,

⁸¹ Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. by Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 124.

⁸² Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 185.

exempla move [listeners] more than mere words do and are more easily grasped by the understanding and more deeply fixed in the memory.”⁸³

Other than the Prologue and the final chapters describing the miracles performed by John’s relics for the *Life of Abbot John*, the *Bonum Universale de Apibus* was the last of Thomas’s literary efforts. He is thought to have died around 1270.⁸⁴

II. The Economic and Pastoral Context of Thomas’s Ministry

Beginning in the eleventh century, the Southern Low Countries underwent massive development and urbanization concomitant with rapid population growth. They were, in Thomas’s day, one of the most industrialized and urbanized regions of Western Europe. While Italy had the largest cities in Europe, the density of the cities in the Southern Low Countries, as well as the proportion of the population that lived within or in close proximity to cities, was unrivalled.⁸⁵ An international merchant class (of which Lutgard’s father was a part) gained prominence in economic and political life. This urban revolution began in eleventh-century Flanders, whose greatest city, Ypres, was the home of Margaret. To the east of Flanders lay the duchy of Brabant, the center of Thomas’s pastoral activities, which underwent a similarly rapid urbanization in the twelfth century.⁸⁶ It included the towns of Brussels, Louvain, and Antwerp, as well as Nivelles,

⁸³ M. M. Mulchahey, “*First the bow*,” p. 461. “Quoniam plus exempla quam verba movent secundum Gregorium et facilius intellectu capiuntur et alicuius memoria infiguntur.”

⁸⁴ R. Godding, “Une oeuvre inédite,” p. 244; Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 15.

⁸⁵ Jennifer Carpenter, *Between Heaven and Earth*, p. 7.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Marie's home, and the village of Aywières, where Lutgard lived out her days as a Cistercian.

The political, religious, and linguistic divisions of the Southern Low Countries are notoriously complicated, resulting in a “patchwork of competing allegiances.”⁸⁷ The primary political constituencies were the county of Flanders (a fief of the French king), the duchy of Brabant, and the prince-bishopric of Liège, the latter two of which owed allegiance to the German emperor. However, neither the French nor German king had control over these “frontier lands” after the twelfth century.⁸⁸ All three of these regions had French and Flemish-speaking inhabitants. The dioceses did not correspond with the political divisions; the diocese of Liège, part of the archdiocese of Cologne, included the prince-bishopric of Liège and a large part of the duchy of Brabant.⁸⁹

From the twelfth century, the economic power of the Southern Low Countries included the urban middle class, whose growth occurred in symbiosis with the old landed aristocracy.⁹⁰ This composition is reflected in Thomas's *vitae*: of its cast of characters, only Lutgard had a noble mother, though her father was a merchant, while the others were born of parents who were artisanal or bourgeois town and city dwellers.⁹¹ This

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

⁸⁸ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 2.

⁸⁹ Jennifer Carpenter, *Between Heaven and Earth*, p. 10, n. 11.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 12; Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p. 4.

⁹¹ John's parents lived “by the work of their hands” in the city of Cambrai, but they were able to earn enough money to send John to study theology in Paris (*VJC* I.1); Christina was born of “respectable (*honestis*) parents” in the town of Sint-Truiden (*VCM* 4), the same adjective given to Margaret's parents in the city of Ypres (*VMY* 1). On the adjectives *honestus* and *mediocris* used

urban population was remarkably literate. Beginning in the twelfth century, the merchant class challenged ecclesiastical control of educational institutions and provided secular education for boys and girls in the three ‘R’s, with subsidies for poor children.⁹² As Jennifer Carpenter argues, the urban context is important for understanding the new forms of piety described in *vitae* like Thomas’s, for cities provided new opportunities and offered a social milieu rooted in the mobility of a newly prosperous population. “Spurred by the breathtaking vision of a newly-purified church promoted by Gregorian reformers,” she writes, “the Christian world, which had formerly been suspicious of change, now began to think that innovation in religious life could be part of God’s continual changing plan for a changing world, and, further, that the church was obliged to provide for the specialized needs of the urban populations.”⁹³

Beginning in the eleventh century and burgeoning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, forms of piety and spiritual aspiration that had been confined within monastery walls were no longer contained by them. The laity in larger numbers came to a changed “religious consciousness” that “no longer saw the essence of Christianity fulfilled in church alone” but rather “sought to realize Christianity as a way of life, binding on every

to describe the families of *mulieres religiosae*, see McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, pp. 81-100; J. Carpenter, *Between Heaven and Earth*, p. 12 n. 17.

⁹² Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p. 7.

⁹³ J. Carpenter, *Between Heaven and Earth*, p. 14. On the perception that the Gregorian reforms were novel creations, see Beryl Smalley, “Ecclesiastical Attitudes to Novelty, c. 1100-1250,” in *Studies in Medieval Thought and Learning: From Abelard to Wyclif* (London: Hambledon Press, 1981), p. 97.

individual, a commitment more essential than one's place in the hierarchical *ordo*.”⁹⁴

Herbert Grundmann argues that this new understanding arose, in part, through the Gregorian reforms. While Gregory VII attempted to consolidate and sharpen the distinction between lay and clerical orders, he appealed to the laity, who were asked to judge the worthiness of individual priests to prepare and serve the sacrament. The laity thereby came to possess a kind of authority in relation to clerics, of whom they could be critical and whose fate they could influence. Thus, although the Gregorian reforms were founded upon a notion that the proper ordering of the ecclesiastical hierarchy was such that power flowed from God through the papacy and eventually to the lowliest clerics by means of apostolic succession, the neo-Donatism concomitantly expounded by Gregory VII and his supporters—arguing *ex opere operantis* in their attempt to give weight to the removal of simoniacal priests and those who practiced “concubinage”—undermined this reforming effort. As priestly worthiness came to be seen to reside in behavior rather than sacramentally bestowed by ordination alone, the questioning of particular priests became more common and raised the specter of the insufficiency of ordination. The fluid urban marketplace of ideas and high rates of literacy enabled this growing sense of authority and religious prerogative among the laity to spread.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, trans. by Steven Rowan (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 8.

⁹⁵ In support of Grundmann's argument, Walter Simons notes that the eleventh-century cases of heresy in Arras and Cambrai—the most economically advanced areas of the Southern Low Countries at the time—turned not on issues of dogma, but critiques of the clergy. In Arras, some laypersons were condemned for questioning the validity of baptism by immoral priests. In Cambrai, a layman accused the local bishop of simony and refused to take the Eucharist administered by him. He was killed by the bishop's henchmen (Simons, *Cities*, p. 15).

Following the investiture controversy, Grundmann argues, two new ideals emerged as essential to Christian piety, namely voluntary poverty and the “apostolic life,” including itinerant preaching. These ideals would find expression in twelfth-century heretical movements like the Waldensians and among papally approved wandering preachers like Robert of Arbrissel (who was given permission to preach in 1096) in northern France and Norbert of Xanten, former archbishop of Cologne, who was given permission to preach in 1118.⁹⁶

Robert, Norbert, and other itinerant preachers were eventually required to cease their wanderings that, despite papal permission, made the hierarchy nervous; the “unstable crowds” of male and female followers and the virulent criticisms of the clergy they expounded were of particular concern. Following in the tradition of the Gregorian reformers, many founded double monasteries: Robert in Fontevrault around 1100, and Norbert, Premontr  Abbey at Laon in 1120, very close to Thomas’s sphere of activity. However, these measures to contain what Grundmann terms a “movement”—meaning ideals and interests held in common among different vocational paths—within the traditional terms of the monastic *ordo* did not ultimately suffice, and the innovative spirit and desire of an increasing number of the laity to live the ideals of voluntary poverty and apostolic life outside the confines of the cloister continued.

An important witness to this shift in the spiritual center of gravity is Lambert le B gue (d. 1177), a dissident cleric in Li ge, wrongly credited with bestowing his name on the beguines. Lambert not only railed publicly against simony and the more generalized greed of the clergy but, with reference to apostolic writings, declared it a duty

⁹⁶ Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, p. 9.

for all Christians—not only priests—to exhort one another by good example. He also said that all Christians could enjoy spiritual union with Christ himself. The priest’s role in the process of spiritual advancement was one of cooperation with the laity, his function to enable and strengthen the inherent moral capacities of all individuals. Lambert thus translated the Book of Acts into vernacular verse for the laity, and St. Agnes’s *vita* for a group of virgins.⁹⁷ Imprisoned for heresy, Lambert appealed to Calixtus III. Escaping from prison, he fled to the papal court in Rome where he composed an *apologia*. The documents from his trial reveal that there was intense lay interest in studying and discussing the scriptures, particularly Acts, as it articulated what they understood to be the apostolic ideal for the church. Furthermore, many among these groups practiced an intense Eucharistic piety.⁹⁸ Lambert’s testimony illuminates a “startling lay religiosity” among men and women that straddled the border of orthodoxy and heresy, revealing contestation over the nature and limits of lay religiosity at the turn of the thirteenth century.⁹⁹

The burgeoning lay piety of Lambert’s circle centered on the ideals of the apostolic life and was continuous with what Grundmann terms the women’s religious movement, at the heart of which were gospel ideals of voluntary poverty and, often, chastity.¹⁰⁰ This lay pursuit of the apostolic life can be seen in the Lives of Marie of Oignies, Margaret of Ypres, and Christina the Astonishing, all laywomen who lived in

⁹⁷ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p. 28.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁰ Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, p. 83.

chastity and renounced financial ambitions while pursuing an intense contemplative regime in a secular context. The innovative spirit of this movement is also glimpsed in the piety of those women James of Vitry, in the Prologue to the *Life of Marie of Oignies*, termed *mulieres sanctae* (also called *mulieres religiosae*)—women without institutional affiliation who nonetheless pursued a life of contemplation, chastity, and poverty. The Prologue witnesses to what Brenda Bolton calls a “small, like-minded, closely knit group of people,” primarily women, in Brabant-Flanders who practiced physical mortification, poverty, and contemplation.¹⁰¹ The Premonstratensian canons and other orders of regular canons offered multiple vocational opportunities for women: some women of the order, such as those John of Cantimpré established next to the male foundation at Prémy, practiced strict claustration and resembled nuns.¹⁰² Others performed menial labor rather than choir service, while others were recluses or, like Marie of Oignies, hospital workers with a loose association to a community of canons.¹⁰³

Thomas’s hagiographical corpus not only attests to the diversity of religious vocation available to women in the Southern Low Countries but also reveals the profound relationships between women in different forms of religious life, particularly recluses, beguines, laywomen, and Cistercians. This can be seen in the friendships between Lutgard and the itinerant Christina *mirabilis*, and between the beguine Marie of Oignies and the recluse Jutta of Borgloon (with whom Christina also lived for nine years).

Simone Roisin’s work demonstrates the deep connections between beguines and

¹⁰¹ Brenda Bolton, “*Vitae Matrum*,” p. 260

¹⁰² *VJC* I.3-4.

¹⁰³ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p. 21.

Cistercians in Liège. More recent research has attested to the “equally close relationship between the beguines and the Dominicans in the same area.”¹⁰⁴ Thomas’s own career demonstrates this link, as does Lutgard’s close relationships with friar Bernard and Thomas, and Margaret’s relationship with Friar Zeger. Differences in vocation and gender did not restrain communication or mutual influence.

Thomas’s vocation as a Dominican bore many similarities to that of the *mulieres religiosae*. Indeed, the religious innovation of these women was mirrored by innovations within groups like the Dominicans. Formally authorized by Honorius III in 1216, the Dominicans followed the Augustinian Rule, practicing voluntary poverty, chastity, and (as their moniker, the Order of Preachers suggests) preaching—itinerant preaching in particular. As a Regular Canon, Dominic of Osma was already familiar with the itinerancy and apostolic life of Norbert of Xanten, founder of the Canons Regular, and Dominic drew on these roots to create the new order, which was clerical and learned from the outset, retaining some features of monastic life even as it divested itself of the earlier monastic ideal of *stabilitas*.¹⁰⁵ Dominican focus on the apostolic life arose as a way to persuade converts to the Cathar heresy in Languedoc—the early Dominicans having been impressed by the apostolic austerity of Cathar *perfecti* in comparison with what they saw as the bloated materialism of the church of Rome and the Cistercian missionaries sent to

¹⁰⁴ Brenda Bolton, “*Vitae Matrum*,” p. 260.

¹⁰⁵ C.H. Lawrence, *The Friars: The Impact of the Early Mendicant Movement on Western Society* (London: Longman, 1994), p. 65. The monastic tradition was apparent in the friars’ domestic life, as they organized the day according to the choral recitation of the divine office, fasting in monastic periods, and observing silence within the house at all times. However, the offices were to be sung *breviter* in order to leave more time for studying, and manual labor was no longer required (Ibid., p. 81).

preach to them.¹⁰⁶ In their swift rise to pan-European importance the order became a way for the papacy to “bridge the gap” between the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the multitude of new religious movements and the spiritually ambitious laity. The Dominicans gave prominence to apostolic preaching and poverty within a papally approved order and served the expanding needs of the laity in their role as preachers and confessors.¹⁰⁷ Through their pastoral ministry, the friars created a ministry focused on urban contexts, providing “new forms of religious expression specifically for the urban sector of society,” including opportunities and practices for lay participation in devotional life, thereby enhancing the laity’s “sense of spiritual worth.”¹⁰⁸ As the careers of Thomas and Zeger attest, an important component of this ministry involved the *cura animarum* of women.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 235-6; Lawrence, *The Friars*, pp. 67-69.

¹⁰⁷ Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁸ Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (London: P. Elek, 1978), p. 161. In addition to their highly popular sermons, which attracted large crowds, the Dominicans converted Compline into a service open to the public, where the townspeople would chant the Salve Regina. This became highly popular.

¹⁰⁹ The Dominican order attracted women from its inception. A foundation at Prouille was created by Diego of Osma as a place for female converts from Catharism. Dominic established a nunnery of “preacheresses” in Madrid. However, Dominic never envisioned or supported female adoption of the mendicant life. The foundation at Prouille was one of strict enclosure, modeled on Premontre. In the course of the thirteenth century, the Dominican treatment of women became highly complex. In 1228 the general chapter legislated to end the further extension of ministry to nunneries and the history of the mid-thirteenth century involves Dominican nuns being “cast off by their parent orders.” However, after several decades of struggle, women’s houses won recognition from the Dominican cardinal Hugh of St Cher (d. 1263) and Master General Humbert of Romans (d. 1277). Humbert declared that the friars were obliged to provide spiritual care for nuns. He drafted new constitutions for women’s convents in order to standardize observance, which were approved in 1259. In so doing, legal existence was given to the Dominican Second Order (Lawrence, *The Friars*, p. 81).

Dominican preaching against heresy was a central means by which the papacy attempted to control the lay thirst for apostolic life and religious expression. However, papal response was not confined to wrangling existing movements; the canons of the fourth Lateran council attempted to govern the efflorescence of new practices and movements, while instituting new requirements for all Christians. The canons demonstrate a concern to increase the centralization and standardization of Christian practice. Under Innocent III, the papacy thus officially extended the requirements for lay participation in the religious life even as it instituted the means to supervise and control this participation. Canon 21 required annual communication, which in turn entailed annual confession, also outlined in canon 21.

Because the Dominicans were vital to the implementation of the canons of Lateran IV, Thomas's pastoral vision was deeply marked by its program of quelling heresy and forming the laity into religious subjects who accord with Lateran IV ideals. Thomas's *vitae* vividly portray the "confessing subject" who is placed under surveillance by the requirement to confess to a priest but who, it is hoped, will ultimately learn *self-surveillance*.¹¹⁰ Lutgard is depicted achieving such interior vigilance. Her confessor was not Thomas but another Dominican friar, Bernard. She was tormented, Thomas writes, by "inordinate scruples" in her attempt to reach "total perfection" while saying the Hours.¹¹¹ Margaret was overcome with a grief that terrified her confessor, Zeger. Thinking that she had done some truly horrible deed, he discovered that she had only missed saying the

¹¹⁰ Peter Brooks addresses the way in which confession articulates and forms the interiority of the one confessing in *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Ch. 1 addresses Lateran IV.

¹¹¹ *VLA* II.17.

canonical hours because she had been rapt in ecstasy.¹¹² As Dyan Elliott observes, a practiced confessor, Thomas filled his hagiographies with examples of the importance of confession and penitence in the formation of the saintly person. Lutgard and Margaret, as well as others converted by John who make full penitential gestures upon their conversion, became model advocates of submission to priestly mediation in confession, counteracting the Cathar appeal to an alternative hierarchy or the heretical claim that confession to God alone was enough. “In the course of [Thomas’s] hagiographical writings,” Elliott writes, “a new kind of saint begins to emerge—one whose sanctity not only is revealed in but even develops through her evolving relation with her confessor.... The appearance of the new confessor saint was contingent upon the new role of the confessor.”¹¹³ Margaret of Ypres, in particular, tellingly models such dependence and adoration for the confessor.

Thomas’s creation of saintly figures that resist or appropriate heretical claims resides not only in his portrayal of subjects who perfectly enact the requirements of Lateran IV. As Elliott shows, by foregrounding the ascetic practices of his subjects—including running through brambles, fasting, raptures, illnesses, and the long and marvelous list of Christina’s penitential acts—as well as their Eucharistic piety and visions of the human Christ (which Roisin attributed to beguinal influence),¹¹⁴ Thomas produced constructions designed to counter Cathar antimaterialism, essential to the

¹¹² VMY 20.

¹¹³ Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 58.

¹¹⁴ Roisin, *L’Hagiographie Cistercienne*, pp. 92-3. She argues that the extremity of these ascetic practices contradicted the Cistercian ideal of moderation.

“sponsored emergence” of the *mulieres religiosae* by clerics seeking avenues to resist heresy.¹¹⁵ The sacramental focus of the piety of the *mulieres religiosae* has the further benefit of providing yet another opportunity to demonstrate the saint’s dependence on and respect for the clerical caste, undermining neo-Donatist notions.¹¹⁶ Though the precise paths of Cathar influence are difficult to reconstruct, the ideas probably entered the Southern Low Countries with Crusaders in 1100, turning the region into a “hotbed” of Cathar activity and clerical counter-measures. Following the burning of Cathars in Cologne in 1163, their persecution, Walter Simons notes, “would be vigorous and unrelenting.”¹¹⁷ For Elliott, the hagiographical construction of these women as sacramentally and clerically focused penitents placed Thomas at the vanguard of a later medieval tendency to represent female spirituality according to the “subtle contours of displacement or reappropriation of heretical claims.”¹¹⁸ Thomas’s holy women were constructed essentially as weapons in a battle against heresy, the *vitae* compelling propaganda offering orthodox exemplars of the holy life as an alternative to the ideals proffered by Cathar and other heretical poverty movements. The figuration of the orthodox saint as supportive of the clergy, with a piety oriented around the sacraments,

¹¹⁵ Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman*, ch. 2.

¹¹⁶ Thus Grundmann, based on the representation of admiration for clerics in their *vitae*, was able to write that the women’s religious movement differentiated itself from the “heretical poverty movement” by its lack of those Donatist-like demands that initially inspired such lay religiosity (*Religious Movements*, p. 83).

¹¹⁷ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p. 17.

¹¹⁸ Elliott, *Proving Woman*, p. 70. In so doing, Elliott understands Thomas to be at least indirectly responsible for the later criminalization of women’s spirituality, for even as he uses women as proof of orthodoxy, he advocates a procedure of proving such orthodoxy through submission to priestly authority, an authority which, by the end of the fourteenth-century, will be used to systematically and skeptically scrutinize women’s spiritual claims (*Proving Woman*, p. 2).

the human Christ, and ascetic practices that underscored the embodied nature of the religious life addressed various heretical currents—antimaterialism, neo-Donatism—that were often attributed to those heretical movements dominated by the urban laity.¹¹⁹

As much as the desire to fight heresy drove Thomas's strategies of representation in each of his *vitae*, this dissertation argues that the exemplarity of his subjects cannot be construed solely in terms of antiheretical propaganda. The reduction of the complexity and diversity of his hagiographical corpus to this single aim obscures the way in which the work changed over time and ignores the way in which a single *vita* often treats the exemplarity of the saint in contradictory ways or problematizes it in a self-conscious fashion. Much twentieth-century scholarship has noted that representations of exemplarity are not historically stable.¹²⁰ Religious ideals do not arise in a vacuum but are formed in social contexts with which they are fully imbricated.¹²¹ However, despite this attention to the contextual character of hagiographical exemplars, it is still common for scholars to use a functionalist approach in reading hagiographical texts, whereby the

¹¹⁹ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p. 19.

¹²⁰ Such a view became a commonplace for twentieth-century medieval scholars. See for example, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell, eds, *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), which considers “new ways of imagining and ‘imaging’ the medieval saint” (p. vii) in different historical contexts. The sociological work of Rudolph Bell and Donald Weinstein (*Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom 1100-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), traces the changing themes, behaviors and figures within hagiographical documents as evidence of shifts in social realities which are reflected in piety and notions of exemplarity. A similar project that examines changing attitudes toward and criteria for sanctity through a study of canonization documents is André Vauchez's *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. by Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹²¹ See Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. by Peter Putnam (New York, 1953), p. 63. A co-founder of the *Annales* school, he argued that the ideal of sanctity in any given hagiography, though expressed in part through ahistorical tropes, nevertheless bears the marks of its historical situation.

writer is seen as wielding a one-dimensional ideology while the saint is treated as a two-dimensional “type” whose lack of depth facilitates her function as spiritual or political propaganda. Thus, while exemplarity is understood to change over time, it is still treated as fairly stable within a given period.

While Thomas (and James before him) were devoted to the cause of antiheretical preaching, their vocation and interests brought them into close dependence on figures who were sometimes accused of heresy or negative “innovation,” even as they were themselves members of novel movements. Moreover, as much as James or Thomas attempted to frame the *mulieres sanctae* in the traditions of desert fathers and mothers, virgin martyrs, and gospel models, their *vitae* go far beyond the emulation of these historical precedents, for they introduce a “mystical element” alongside their depictions of intense asceticism. Brenda Bolton identifies two aspects of this mystical piety, namely its Christocentrism and Eucharistic devotion.¹²² The devotion to Christ often led to an idealization of sharing his suffering and gave rise to profound mortification. Instances of such mortification abound in the hagiographies from Liège. For example, Marie of Oignies, “inflamed by an overwhelming fire of love” and horrified by the memory of eating meat when ill, cut out a “large piece” of her flesh and buried it in the ground.¹²³ The astonishing feats of Christina *mirabilis*¹²⁴ and Margaret of Ypres’ extensive illness in which she haemorrhaged constantly—interpreted by Thomas as a purgation of sin—are

¹²² Ibid., p. 267. In this she follows Simone Roisin, *L’Hagiographie Cistercienne*, pp. 8-9, who, as we have noted, argued that the novel piety of the region was a result of the mingling of beguinal and Bernadine streams of devotion, doctrine, and practice.

¹²³ *VMO*, I.22.

¹²⁴ *VCM*, 9-20.

further examples of this extreme bodily mortification.¹²⁵ In addition to these ascetic practices, James describes novel paramystical phenomena, including lengthy ecstasies in which a woman was seemingly catatonic, unable to “feel a blow” for an entire day, or the case of another woman who experienced twenty-five such ecstasies in a single day and, upon returning to her senses, showed her inner joy by a “bodily tic” and “jumping up and down.”¹²⁶ The face of another woman was reportedly marked with the traces of tears from habitual weeping, while others suffered a kind of love-sickness lying “faint with desire” in their beds for years.¹²⁷

While, as Elliott has shown, an emphasis on the physicality of female piety was useful in countering Cathar antimaterialism, the excessiveness and novelty of these depictions complicates and undermines their function as simple propaganda or as exemplars easily translatable into models appropriate for a reader. The novelty of the spiritual practices described by Thomas and James, as well as their intimate relationship with women (which the *VMY* reveals as contentious), inspired attacks against them and the women they supported. Half of James of Vitry’s *Second Sermon to Virgins* is devoted to a defense of the beguines, in which he compares their detractors to dogs and spiders.¹²⁸ The Prologue to the *VMO* writes of those who “deride and despise those things that they do not understand.” Such are “animal men who do not have the Spirit of God, although

¹²⁵ *VMY*, 41-50.

¹²⁶ *VMO* Pr. 7.

¹²⁷ *VMO* Pr. 6.

¹²⁸ Brenda Bolton, “Some Thirteenth Century Women: A Special Case?” in *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis*, 61:1 (1981), 18.

they are considered to be prudent among themselves. They do not want to see what they cannot understand by human reasoning.”¹²⁹ Gregory IX, described in the *Supplement* as a devotee of Marie of Oignies whose relic and *vita* cured him of the spirit of blasphemy, advised northern bishops to protect beguines from the abuse of clerics, monks, and laymen.¹³⁰ In the *VLA*, Thomas writes of one of James’s detractors, “May that vile slanderer blush for shame—he who said and wrote that people who record the fantastic visions of insignificant women should be considered profane.”¹³¹ In the early thirteenth century, these detractors are unnamed, though in the *Second Sermon to Virgins*, James calls them “rich men and secular prelates”¹³² By the mid-thirteenth century, however, the enemies of beguines included William of St Amour and Ruteboeuf, voices central to the secular-Mendicant controversy at the University of Paris.¹³³

Although uncloistered beguines were particularly vulnerable to suspicion, the Prologue to the *VLA* betrays an anxiety that the tale of a Cistercian nun will not be believed, because no *vita* filled with such “remarkable virtues, marvels and miracles” (*virtutum insignia & mirabilium ac miraculorum*) “has been written for many years” (*a multis retroactis annis fuisse descriptam*). Thomas may have used Lutgard’s example to defend the novel piety of the women’s religious movement (including that of the beguines) in part because her order gave her the proper credentials. However, he

¹²⁹ *VMO*, Pr. 10.

¹³⁰ B. Bolton, “Some Thirteenth Century Women: A Special Case?” p. 19.

¹³¹ *VLA* III.5.

¹³² B. Bolton, “Some Thirteenth Century Women: A Special Case?” p. 19.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

understood this institutional provision did not render her immune from the attacks of skeptics. Like the uncloistered women described by James, Lutgard languished with love for Christ, her bridegroom (III.9; III.12); in an utterly new phenomenon, she “exchanged hearts” with Christ (I.12);¹³⁴ she experienced a lengthy catatonic ecstasy while meditating on the Passion during which her hair and skin dripped with blood (II.23); and her hands dripped with oil while she meditated on a verse of the Song of Songs (I.16).

Beryl Smalley has shown how the notion of novelty underwent change in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The adjective “new” was often pejoratively applied to the radical Gregorian reformers. In 1085, one opponent of the reformers wrote, “O nova lex, O dogmum novum, noviter fabricatum.”¹³⁵ However, in the thirteenth-century Italian urban and mendicant contexts, much as in the Low Countries, the novel acquired a more positive connotation. For instance, an encomium for St. Francis ascribed to Thomas of Celano praises the saint for his novelty: “Novus ordo, nova vita/Mundo surgit inaudita.” The “unheard of” became a marker of sanctity or, more precisely, a way of describing the full contemporary realization of gospel primitivism.¹³⁶ Thomas and James’s *vitae* reveal the struggle to enlist the novel in defense of the ancient faith.

¹³⁴ Thomas further articulates Lutgard’s total union with God in II.43 when he writes, in a Eucharistic and Bernadine image that “Lutgard’s spirit was absorbed in God and, like the Queen of Sheba, fainting in admiration, she ‘no longer had any spirit in her.’ Now she was wholly translated into God, like a drop of water in a cask of wine and mingled with him as one spirit.” The image is from Bernard of Clairvaux’s *De Diligendo Deo*, 10, 28. (“Proinde ita spiritus ejus absorbebatur in Deum; ut cum Regina Saba in admiratione deficiens, ultra spiritum non haberet; sed tota translata in Deum, instar guttæ aquæ in dolium vini, unus cum eo spiritus miscebatur”).

¹³⁵ Beryl Smalley, “Ecclesiastical Attitudes to Novelty,” in *Studies in Medieval Thought and Learning From Abelard to Wyclif* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1981), p. 97.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

I will argue in what follows that Thomas's hagiographical corpus must be contextualized in terms of the ambivalent status of the women's religious movement in the mid-thirteenth century. At a time when religious life was necessarily tied to a papally approved *regula*, a saint such as Marie, Christina, and Margaret, who took no vow and obeyed a private rule was a novelty in terms of how she became saintly and how she manifested her holiness to others. Moreover, Roisin has shown how Thomas's *Life of Lutgard* was a new genre of hagiographical writing that described a novel kind of female monasticism. In order to demonstrate and justify the sanctity of these strange figures, a justification that necessarily implied a critique of the old *ordo* and monastic practice, Thomas developed rhetorical techniques to describe novel behaviors in such a way that assured the exemplary holiness of his marginal subjects, even as he foregrounded its novelty to astound readers. Thus, Thomas often figures his novel saints as emblems of the early church and a return to the days of the New Testament. This movement of return, however, also points forward to the *eschaton*, a time marked by the emergence of "all things new." Both apocalyptic and nostalgic language pervade his texts.

I argue that the exemplarity of Thomas's saintly figures is greatly complicated by the peculiar historical situation in which he wrote. The diverse vocational possibilities represented in Thomas's corpus mirror his social context, one in which great religious experimentation and innovation were occurring, making available a new variety of forms of the religious life to women and men. Thomas's Dominican project of defending orthodoxy makes use of figures that participate in these novel forms of the religious life. These diverse types of saintly figures are represented with different rhetorical and representational strategies, strategies that relate to the subjects whom he treats, the

audiences to whom the *vitae* are addressed and which he hopes to form through the reading of his *vitae* and other desired effects of his narratives. The diversity that we encounter in this corpus, I argue, belies any attempt to reduce Thomas's project to a singular aim or his saints to a single type crafted for a single end, including that of destroying heresy.

The dissertation shows that although Thomas's *vitae* represent novel forms of the religious life, they simultaneously thematize the difficulties attendant upon such novelty. Thomas's writings are an arena of debate, at times revealing Thomas's own uncertainties, but his experimental spirit in attempting to articulate emerging conceptions of holiness in the new movements treated by his corpus. The result is that, while he claims to offer texts that edify, instruct, terrify, or offer imitable models for readers, his saints are often presented in ways that undermine his stated aims.

For instance, Thomas grapples with the problem of the credibility of the *vitae*, an issue that arises precisely because of the "unheard of" quality of many of his figures. The newness of saints like Christina, Marie, Margaret, and Lutgard is an important source of their interest for hagiographer and audience alike. However, their lack of historical precedent and the often-strange nature of their religiosity leads Thomas to fear that readers will not believe in the sanctity claimed by his texts for these figures. The *vitae* deploy various strategies to negotiate this difficulty, maintaining and foregrounding the novelty and strangeness of their saintly subjects even as they seek rhetorical means of proving the trustworthiness of their accounts. The reader's belief is central to Thomas's project: in order for the work of the narratives as inspiring *exempla* to be efficacious, the reader must believe not only in the saintly nature of those he describes but also in the

veracity of his tale. Thomas is not interested in writing fictions. Even the strangeness of Christina's story—one he acknowledges “surpasses understanding”—is emphasized as a tale of true events.

Steven Justice argues that contemporary scholarship regards belief as a “black box” inaccessible to modern scholars, thus “enforc[ing] an idea of the immediacy to faith” on the part of medieval people.¹³⁷ Such a move repeats the exoticization of the Middle Ages that scholarship has attempted to overcome.¹³⁸ Justice argues that two dominant accounts emerge from this bracketing, which are used to interpret hagiographic and miracle tales: the didactic and the perceptual. The didactic account explains miracle stories as exemplary tales told solely for the purpose of edification, pursuing a moral that can be learned without belief in the facticity of the narrative. The literal story in this case is simply the incidental structure upon which the moral allegory hangs its lesson.¹³⁹ The second account, the perceptual, claims that medieval people, lacking a scientific worldview capable of distinguishing between the natural and the supernatural, medieval people easily and unconsciously explained natural events supernaturally.¹⁴⁰ Miracles in this view were experienced unreflectively as real and pervasive.

¹³⁷ Steven Justice, “Did the Middle Ages Believe in their Miracles?” *Representations* (103) Summer 2008, p. 1.

¹³⁸ On the prevalence of such exoticization through an appeal to medieval alterity, see Paul Freedman and Gabrielle Spiegel, “Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies,” *The American Historical Review* vol. 103 no. 3 (June 1998), pp. 677-704.

¹³⁹ Justice, “Did the Middle Ages Believe in their Miracles?” p. 4.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Justice's argument that hagiographies "bare the devices of faith" and "open to inspection the constraints they work on themselves to maintain their credit in what seems scarcely credible" is evident within Thomas's *vitae* as he draws attention to his narratives *as* narratives, self-consciously soliciting the reader's belief, offering the reader strategies of reading that will, he argues, facilitate their belief in the scarcely credible.¹⁴¹ Again, this credibility is essential for the exemplary nature of the texts to be effective: without the belief of the reader, the claims the *vitae* make upon readers as authoritative documents containing directives and models for readers to follow would not exist. Chapters two and three will treat the very different tactics of persuasion undertaken by Thomas in the Lives of John, Christina, Marie, and Lutgard. These chapters take up Justice's contention that the didactic and perceptual accounts, unable to cope with the problem of belief as raised by hagiographical texts themselves, impoverish our capacity to understand the complex ways they were created and received.

Thomas's *vitae* bare the devices of faith in ways that lead him to show how he would like the hagiographies to be read. In the process, he draws on multiple—often competing—discourses, including the theological, juridical, scriptural, and autobiographical. In chapter three, I argue that the most telling distinction in the *Supplement* and the *VLA* is between a corrosive hermeneutic—in which the reader seeks proof in a juridical sense, weighing evidence and placing the text on trial, so to speak—and an Augustinian hermeneutic, in which the reader contemplates the text, treating it as an object of devotion through which the reader is affectively transformed. The two

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 15.

approaches reveal Thomas's twin aims to convince rationally and to inspire transformative personal devotion.

III. The Medieval *Exemplum*

Medieval writers used the term *exemplum* in multiple ways. It was a medieval mode of argumentation particularly popular with preachers, which used vivid examples to illustrate doctrine, provide entertainment and edification, and offer models for imitation. Thomas's use of the term reveals its malleability within a single corpus: the whole of Lutgard's *vita*, the brief, vivid, historical narratives "illustrating our faith" in the *VJC*, and the message of purgatorial punishment and the necessity of penance preached by Christina's post-resurrection existence, are all named *exempla* by him. For Thomas, then, *exemplum* refers to the narrativization of the exemplary person, illustrative stories, and edifying events. It is a narrative and a figure, a duality that E.R. Curtius argues was achieved in approximately 100 B.C.E. when the notion of the *exemplum* as an "interpolated anecdote serving as an example" was added the *exemplum* as *imago* or *eikon*, an incarnation of a quality in a figure.¹⁴²

Debates among medievalists about whether the *exemplum* constitutes a genre have resulted in so little consensus as to lead Vitale-Borvarone to argue that it is impossible to define the medieval *exemplum* according to a standardized typology.¹⁴³ This lack of

¹⁴² Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 59-60.

¹⁴³ Alessandro Vitale-Borvarone, "Persuasione e narrazione: l'*Exemplum* tra due retoriche (VI-XII secoli)" in *Mélanges de l'école française de Rome—Moyen âge—Temps modernes* 92, part 1 (1980), p. 95. Quoted in Lyons, *Exemplum*, n. 16, p. 245.

typological consistency had already been observed in 1890 by T. F. Crane in his anthology and English translation of James of Vitry's *Sermones Vulgares*. He noted that there was no single criterion used by medieval compilers of exempla collections for preachers. Moral reflection, biography, and historical events were all used in providing material for preachers.¹⁴⁴ In his *Index Exemplorum*, F. Tubach, following T. F. Crane, argues that the type of literature that constituted an *exemplum* in the medieval period was widely variable (including biography, history, fable) but that, in each case, it was determined by the same rhetorical function: "the *exemplum* is an attempt to discover in each narrative event, character, situation or act a paradigmatic sign that would either substantiate religious beliefs and church dogma or delineate social ills and human foibles."¹⁴⁵ This definition is in basic agreement with the most widely quoted definition of the sermon *exemplum* by Jacques Le Goff, who holds that it is "a brief narrative presented as truthful (that is, historical) and used in a discourse (usually a sermon) to convince listeners by offering them a salutary lesson."¹⁴⁶

There has been much complaint among recent scholars, however, both about the vagueness *and* the restrictive specificity of definitions like Le Goff's, itself offered as a solution to a persistent lack of clarity. Thus, although Larry Scanlon agrees with the contention that the sermon *exemplum* (*exempla* that appear in a homiletic context) is

¹⁴⁴ Jacques de Vitry, *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. T.F. Crane, p. xlvii. Quoted in Lyons, *Exemplum*, n. 16, p. 244.

¹⁴⁵ F. C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1979), p. 523. Quoted in Lyons, *Exemplum*, p. 244, n. 16.

¹⁴⁶ Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 78.

intended to convince an audience of a salutary lesson, not all *exempla* were meant to be inserted into another discourse.¹⁴⁷ In his attempt to emphasize the rhetorical *exemplum* in the Renaissance, John Lyons takes issue with the restriction of the *exemplum* to a *narrative* form (in direct contradiction with Larry Scanlon, who argues scholars have generally neglected the *exemplum*'s "specificity as narrative"),¹⁴⁸ and, furthermore, argues that an *exemplum* is not necessarily delivered in the service of an injunction or with an edifying moral purpose, which he sees as an importation of medievalist definitions into the early modern context. Instead, it can, as in the classical rhetorical tradition and the high medieval *Sermones Vulgares*, have the purpose of enhancing understanding or providing entertainment. For Lyons, an exemplary text is not necessarily the same as a didactic one, as many doctrinal texts do not use examples. Instead, an exemplary text is simply one that uses examples.¹⁴⁹ The example in this sense

¹⁴⁷ Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), n. 3, p. 4. Scanlon's argument is intended to contest Karlheinz Stierle, whose work has been and continues to be very influential in contemporary scholarship, including with such thinkers as Timothy Hampton. Stierle argues that the *exemplum*, like the fable, is a "minimal narrative form" arising from "minimal systematic texts," such as the maxim, proverb, and moral precept. This narrative form, concretizing a general point, renders an abstract moral vivid and not only illustrates it, as is commonly said, but makes it "conceivable." For Stierle, the whole purpose of an *exemplum* is this moral precept, which undergirds the *exemplum*'s unity. The kinship with allegory is apparent from this understanding of *exemplum*. ("Story as *Exemplum*—*Exemplum* as Story: On the Pragmatics and Poetics of Narrative Texts" in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism*, ed. Richard E. Amacher et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp 396-7). For Scanlon, while the moral and the narrative are interdependent, it is vital to not understand the moral as statically confirmed by the narrative, but as "reproduced" in the narrative moment in such a way that opens the moral as well as the process of narrativization to "complex questions of power" (p. 5).

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁹ Lyons, *Exemplum*, p. 23. For Jeff Dolven, however, the example in Renaissance English epic is a "didactic technology," used by the humanists as a bridge between precept and practice (*Scenes of Instruction*, p. 138).

is “a dependent statement qualifying a more general and independent statement by naming a member of the class established by the general statement.” It is used most often to clarify or illustrate the proof of the general statement.

The question of whether the medieval *exemplum* constitutes a genre has recently been addressed by the volume *Les Exempla Medievaux*. Peter von Moos’s helpful intervention into the thicket of definitional disagreement is that the *exemplum* is not a literary genre but an argumentative method, a “procedure of persuasion,” even if collections of sermon *exempla* constitute a sub-genre of encyclopedic literature. What matters in attempting to understand *exempla* are their context and purpose within that context. He argues that his definition is a union of Le Goff’s and Quintillian’s description of the rhetorical *exemplum*: “quod proprie vocamus exemplum, rei gestae aut ut gestae utilis ad persuadendum id quod intenderis comemoratio,” [what we properly call an *exemplum* is the calling to mind something done, or as if done, that is useful for persuading what you intend”] (*Inst. Or.* V 11, 6).¹⁵⁰ Thus, a homiletic *exemplum* is different from other kinds of anecdotes (Le Goff’s “brief narratives”) by virtue of its contextualization within a religious argument for the purpose (intention) of delivering a salutary lesson. In all cases, however, following Quintillian’s definition, an *exemplum* has persuasion as its aim.¹⁵¹

Thomas’s use of the term *exemplum* both confirms and problematizes some of these proposed definitions. As a Dominican writing texts for the purpose of edifying different communities of readers, his hagiographies have great kinship with the sermon

¹⁵⁰ Peter von Moos, “L’*exemplum* et les *Exempla* des Precheurs,” *Les Exempla Medievaux: nouvelles perspectives* (Paris: H. Champion, 1998), p. 71.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

exemplum. However, the narrative structure of the Lives is more complex than many of the above definitions would suggest. First, they are not necessarily intended to be intercalated into other discourses, as the *exempla* collected by James of Vitry in the *Sermones Vulgares*, for instance. Such a division and use of the *vitae* is, of course, possible, but not necessary. The *Life of Abbot John of Cantimpré* does follow this pattern, using the word to refer to specific historical events, such as the repentance of a usurious duke, intended to teach a lesson to and inspire certain behaviors in readers about contemporary issues. John's *Life* is composed of a series of such examples, and together they make up John's hagiographical body. However, John often does not figure in these tales at all, and when he does, Thomas seems almost to squeeze him into the tale through the most tenuous of links. The exemplary figure becomes the occasion for a series of lessons and public events that ultimately represent him by displacing him. John's *vita* thus shares, structurally, closest kinship with Thomas collection of sermon *exempla*, *Bonum Universale de Apibus*.

Lutgard's *vita* (called, I have noted, an *exemplum* by Thomas in its Prologue), on the other hand, is a very long narrative which stands independently and is intended to be read as a whole, with each of the three books building upon the other according to a typology of the soul's progression from animal stage, to the rational, to the spiritual. However, this narrative arc is told by way of discrete chapters, each of which is a brief anecdote (often with its own complex narrative integrity), which behaves as an *exemplum* in the sense suggested by Le Goff and others—as events or characters placed within a larger narrative for the purpose of edifying the audience and helping to compose that

larger narrative or sermon—and, as “examples” of Lutgard’s behavior, reactions and experiences.

According to Timothy Hampton, the narrative issue for such a lengthy *exemplum*, an example composed of a tissue of examples, is that of the coherence of the parts of the narrative in relation to each other, as all are meant ultimately to illustrate the same lesson. Hampton argues that the difficulty in such a narrative situation involving complex characters is to maintain this consistency, vital to the efficacy of the exemplary figure, across the multiple parts of a text. In this view, Lutgard, for instance, is a historical figure whose particularities must be carefully controlled in order that her life consistently portrays a uniform message. Hampton argues that the duality between the absolute nature of the lesson and its communication by means of contingent persons creates a tension within the narrativization of the exemplary figure. In an exemplary story, ideally, every moment of the life would be a synecdoche for every other moment, interchangeable and manifesting the same general lesson, even as the narrative and its hero move through time and change.¹⁵² The most “ideologically correct and rhetorically powerful exemplar would be morally unambiguous, representation reduced to absolute semiotic stasis, devoid of ideological ambiguity or figural play.”¹⁵³ While Hampton argues that Renaissance texts exploit the tension between the universality of the message and the contingency of the narrative, it would seem that any long narrative would be subject to

¹⁵² Timothy Hampton, *Writing from History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 24.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

immense difficulty in maintaining such stasis, as its very temporality undermines the “impetus to idealism” in the exemplar.

Hampton’s notion of the ideological drive in exemplary literature is shared by many scholars. Thus Larry Scanlon cites John Burrow who writes that,

The exemplary mode is not very attractive to modern readers...stories that represent themselves as ‘examples...are something of an embarrassment. In a fiction which merely exemplifies an ethical concept (“patience,” “gluttony”) or an accepted truth (“Women are fickle...”), literature condemns itself to an ancillary role as the servant of the moral or political or religious beliefs of its age...in the literal mode of “exemplification,” the story may do no more than illustrate slavishly *idées reçues*. Such is indeed the case with most of the illustrative stories, or *exempla*, to be found in medieval sermons and books of religious instruction.¹⁵⁴

For Burrow, the gesture of exemplification—the attempt to teach through story—overrides narrative complexity. In an exemplary context, the story becomes simply a function of the moral. Rather than interrogate, destabilize, or contradict dominant ideological forces, the illustrative task of the *exemplum* recuperates the entire force of the moral and reiterates it in a mode more pleasing and thus seductive to listeners than a simple lesson would be.

Dyan Elliott’s powerful reading of Thomas as an instrument of the papacy’s implementation of the policies of Lateran IV and anti-heretical campaigns—discussed in the first part of this chapter—can be helpfully understood in light of this discourse on exemplarity. According to Elliott, the Lives are stories illustrating the doctrines of early thirteenth-century orthodoxy, the exemplary life of the saint a living example of an abstract lesson. The Lives thus function as a way to render doctrine vivid and persuasive. The exemplary figure embodies, persuades, pleases, and models virtue as well as a

¹⁵⁴ Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, p. 29.

program of righteous living for readers, who are expected to take up some kind of lesson or paradigm for moral conduct from a *vita* and enact it in their own life. The saint delineates the contours of legitimate behavior and thought; the *imago* of her person is evidence, in the strong sense of *ex-videre*, to show forth, of the good life. She is a rhetorical proof, the central example (*exemplum*) of the rhetorical occasion that is her *vita*; she produces persuasion in her viewers of the desirability, authenticity, and necessity of imitating her form of life.

While this reading of hagiographical documents as indicative of larger historical and ideological battles occurring at the time of their writing points to important elements driving the composition of these stories and the narrative function of the example, it can undermine an appreciation of their narrative complexity, understanding the exemplarity of their figures to be simply a function of the author's ideological program. The narrative dimensions of each of Thomas's *vitae* are subsumed within the historical metanarrative that each *life* is said to monologically reflect. Furthermore, each of Thomas's *vitae* are understood as performing the same function—developing a “far reaching penitential program”—requiring a suppression of the differences among each of the Lives.

While it is a romantic fallacy to argue that narrative is immune from the depredations of ideology, or that narrative is a necessarily liberating force that always subverts and resists the hegemonic force of the maxim, this dissertation argues that the exemplary narratives of hagiography must be read with attention to the operations of exemplarity in the context of the individual hagiographical document and the body of the author's work.¹⁵⁵ Such a reading includes, first, a consideration of the narrative through

¹⁵⁵ See Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, p. 30.

which Thomas represents his exemplary figures. Second, it entails revisiting Thomas's understanding of the *exemplum* and how it functions.

For Thomas, the saint is an instance illustrative not of a “general principle” or a “moral lesson” but of Christ, who is both a *unique* savior and a *model* for all embodied persons to imitate and to participate in. Lutgard imitates more than a model of virtue; she imitates a person whom she apprehends through scriptural narratives and visionary encounters. Her imitation is represented in turn by a narrative irreducible to a simple maxim or principle. Thus while some scholars complain that exemplarity involves the dogmatic subordination of a weak narrative to an overarching dogma, for Thomas, exemplarity is a much more complicated relation, in which the story is at least as powerful as any abstract formulation of a principle.

Thomas's theological understanding of exemplarity gives rise to a fundamental tension within the *vitae* between the singularity of Christ as unique savior and the repetition of his perfection in the life of the saint and the hagiographical text. On the one hand, Thomas desires to claim for his saints their inherently singular status even as he attempts to make their lives available for imitation. The texts thematize this tension, enabling a narrative and rhetorical richness that belies any attempt to find in his texts the kind of heavy-handed didacticism described by Burrow. This tension is apparent in Christina's marvelous body that simultaneously manifests both a highly literal *imitatio Christi*—thus performing what is enjoined of all Christians—and a singular inimitability so powerful as to render her sanctity illegible to onlookers. The tension is also apparent in a complex theorization of what we would today call “reader response,” in which Thomas, aware that the portrayal of the saint who is “set apart” (*sequestrata*) by virtue of her

union with God, requires a particular mode of readerly approach in order to be apprehended and imitated. Finally, the tension becomes a key source of Thomas's representational strategy when he appeals to apophatic theological discourse, calling into question the capacity of language to represent the ineffable saint. Chapter two examines Thomas's narrative of Christina's impossible bodily feats, including her supernatural immersion in boiling vats of oil and freezing rivers, and in "natural" scandals, including her mendicancy and itinerancy. I argue that the astonishing effects the text produces in the reader both serve and undermine its exemplary aims. Christina's *vita* presents her as one who is *ad imitanda* and *ad admiranda*, demonstrating the incommensurability of the two types of exemplarity even as it yokes them within the same person. Christina's singular wondrousness, I argue, is highly gendered, standing in contrast with the representation of Abbott John. Chapters three and four, drawing more explicitly on the historical pressures to which Thomas's work is subject, address Thomas's thematization of the reader in the *Supplement to the Life of Marie of Oignies* and the *Life of Lutgard*.

The final chapter addresses the ways in which the representational strategies of mystical biography affect exemplarity. It looks in particular at the use of what Roisin identifies as the "ineffability topos"—the acknowledgement of the inability of language to capture the saint who, through union with the divine, becomes unspeakable. I argue that Thomas attempts to use a mystical *modus loquendi*, effacing the representation of the saint. The text thus registers its failure to describe its subject. This failure does not only mark the weakness of language; rather, it is a *purposeful* failure that implicates Thomas, the writer, in the text, becoming a central strategy for his own act of imitation of and relation to Lutgard, even as it demonstrates the opacity of the saint to those who gaze

upon her and the limits of the externalizing strategies of hagiographical representation to capture the interior life of the saint.

The difficulties of signification and interpretation in the last of Thomas's *vitae* are not simply transcended by recourse to a clerical "fiat" but are registered by the text, as are the difficulties of the acts of looking and understanding, demonstrating again the way in which his work opens space for contestation. The ineffability *topos* also has the effect of making Lutgard unavailable to the reader for imitation. As Gregory the Great writes in *Moralia on Job*, "[r]eading presents a kind of mirror to the eyes of the mind, that our inner face may be seen in it. There indeed we learn our own ugliness, there our own beauty, for we should transform what we read into our very selves."¹⁵⁶ If this description holds, then Thomas's portrayal of the ineffability of Lutgard obscures the way in which she may function as a mirror, performing her escape from hagiographical representation and the reader's gaze.

In this dissertation I hope to show that while Thomas's work possesses particular didactic aims inspired by his clerical position, his gender, and the particular demands of his time, the Lives are more than subtly shaded versions of the same ideology. How they teach, what they teach, how they envision their audience, and the literary-historical stakes of each of the works are, in many ways, radically different. Close readings reveal that Thomas's Lives not only represent different kinds of exemplary figures using a variety of representational strategies, they call exemplarity into question and press against the limits

¹⁵⁶ Gregory the Great, Preface to *Moralia in Job*, II.i and I.xxxiii. Quoted in Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 159-160.

of the hagiographer's capacity to figure the divine within the singular being of the saint and thereby make it available to others for their imitation or edification.

Chapter Two

Wondrous Horror and the Didactic Exemplar

Part I

Exemplary Unlikeness in the *Vita Christinae Mirabilis*

Et reverberasti infirmitatem aspectus mei, radians in me vehementer, et contremui amore et horrore. Et inveni longe me esse a te in regione dissimilitudinis, tamquam audirem vocem tuam de excelso: “cibus sum grandium cresece et manducabis me. Nec tu me in te mutabis sicut cibum carnis tuae, sed tu mutaberis in me.” Et cognovi quoniam pro iniquitate erudisti hominem, et tabescere fecisti araneam animam meam....

—Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.16

The Savior accordingly became, in a diviner way than Paul, all things to all, that He might either gain all or perfect them.... We must ask, too, about those things which the Savior became which He speaks of through the prophet David, “And I became as a man without any to help him, free among the dead.”

—Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 1b

Truly God is wonderful in his saints, and in this one, if I may say so, his wonders pass all admiration. (*Vere mirabilis Deus in Sanctis suis, & in ista, ut ita dicam, super omnem admirationem mirabilis*)

—Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing* (ch. 49)

Thomas’s *vita* of a young virgin of Liège whom he calls *mirabilis* has continued to surprise and perplex, proving the enduring rhetorical efficacy of a text designed, as its title suggests, to incite astonishment in the face of its wondrous subject.¹⁵⁷ The title given to the virgin, who is called not *beata* but *mirabilis*, sounds the first note of the text’s eccentricity; the blessed will here become astonishing, a wonder. Despite a concern that

¹⁵⁷ Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita Christianae mirabilis*, ed. by J. Pinius, in AASS, 24 July, V, pp. 637-60 (VCM). English translation by Margot King and Barbara Newman in *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints’ Lives*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), pp. 127-160. Hereafter chapter numbers will be cited within the body of the text.

his tale will not be believed, Thomas does not back away from the strangeness of his story. Instead, he seeks the assent of his audience in order to turn his protagonist from village curiosity to saint. Insisting he is “certain” (*certum*) of his facts because of the reliability of his many witnesses, the recent nature of the events described, and the privileged nature of much of the material, coming “from her own mouth,” as well as James of Vitry’s sanction (2-3), Thomas simultaneously foregrounds his text’s ineffability: “I admit—and it is true—that my account surpasses all human understanding (*omnem hominis intellectum excedere*), inasmuch as these things could by no means have occurred according to the course of nature, yet they are possible to the Creator” (3). While Thomas’s contemporary document, *De Natura Rerum* holds that all saintly virtue is ordered to the realm of grace and as such is *unnatural*, exceeding the intellect, Christina’s *vita*, we will see, exaggerates this aspect of sanctity, such that the *vita* becomes a reflection on the implications of saintly supernaturalism.¹⁵⁸

In order to show a wonder that exceeds the intellect, the text both recapitulates and deforms hagiographical conventions, reinscribing them by means of an aesthetic of excess. This aesthetic does not, however, clarify the lines of allegiance in the story; Thomas does not construct a stark drama of good and evil. Instead he instigates a crisis of interpretation, the very crisis he fears.¹⁵⁹ Thomas explicitly articulates the crisis of

¹⁵⁸ Robert Sweetman, “Dominican Preaching in the Low Countries 1240-1260: *Materiae Praedicabiles* in the *Liber de natura rerum* and *Bonum universale de apibus* of Thomas of Cantimpré,” unpublished dissertation, University of Toronto, 1988 p. 135.

¹⁵⁹ Christina’s *vita* shares many of the aesthetic qualities Peter Brooks identifies as constitutive of melodrama, a genre he argues is essentially about the representation of the good through an aesthetic of excess (including hyperbole, a Manichean worldview, heroism sculpted by trauma, tests, victories, exaggerated gestures) that facilitates the recognition of virtue in a world in which the representation and apprehension of the good and the true had entered a state of severe crisis

interpretation that wonder effects when he writes that religious men and women among the crowds who gathered to marvel at Christina were “terrified that these supremely amazing marvels might exceed human reason, and that the beastly minds of men might convert these divine deeds into demonic activity” (*horrentes ne suprema mirabilium admiratio humanum sensum excederet, converterentque bestiales hominum mentes in malignam operationem facta divina*) (20). Indeed, the narration of the crowd’s reaction makes a space for the incredulous reader even as it rebukes him or her. However, Thomas’s own representation of Christina can be read as performing just such a conversion, making ambivalent the line between divine and demonic as a key rhetorical strategy for demonstrating a marvelousness “exceeding human reason,” thus itself becoming in excess of human reason. If Thomas is so concerned to be credible, why is Christina made so astonishing, creating the conditions of her unbelievability? While we could attribute to Thomas a documentary impulse, a desire to record faithfully the perceptions of villagers, his allowance for deep ambivalence in a *vita* that he intends as an authoritative pedagogical tool remains strange. Thomas’s text tempts readers to “convert these divine deeds into demonic activity.” Thus, we must ask in what way Christina’s excessiveness is essential to the purpose of the text.

That Thomas is aware of the deliberate and risky nature of his rhetorical decision is made apparent by a curious passage in the *Life of Abbot John of Cantimpré*. Thomas writes that James left out many things from the *Life of Marie of Oignies* “lest he tire his

(Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 42-43. Melodrama culminates in a “movement of astonishment,” which is, Brooks argues, exemplary, meaning that it provides a *clear* model for spectators to admire and imitate (Ibid., p. 26). The astonishment provoked by the VCM, though also in service of representing the good, has the opposite effect of that described by Brooks insofar as it instigates confusion and misinterpretation.

readers with excess, or lest the incomprehensible greatness of her miracles (*prodigiorum incomprehensibilis magnitudo incredulorum*) become an odour of death rather than life in the hearts of unbelievers.” The deeds that were omitted by James included Marie’s crossing the river Sambre with dry feet, and passing through closed doors while still in a “solid mortal body” (*VJC*, II.8b).¹⁶⁰ These miraculous acts are deeply reminiscent not only of Christ, but of certain deeds attributed to Christina by Thomas, as when she crosses the river Meuse untouched (10), or his description of her physical body as seeming so entirely spiritual it floated “through the middle of the house like a spirit” (46). This passage demonstrates Thomas’s departure from his mentor’s rhetorical decision to avoid those miraculous excesses that would strain a reader’s credibility and turn a text meant to offer an “odor of life” into an occasion for disbelief and thus death.

The *Life of Christina the Astonishing* (1150-1224) was completed in 1232, after Thomas had moved to the Dominicans in Leuven from the Victorine community at Cantimpré, and after he had cut his hagiographical teeth on the *Life of Abbot John of Cantimpré* and the *Supplement to the Life of Marie d’Oignies*.¹⁶¹ The Prologue of Christina’s *Life* contains James de Vitry’s description from the *Life of Marie of Oignies* of a woman who is likely Christina. Embedding the witness of the venerable cardinal authorizes Thomas’s telling of a radically unconventional life. Christina, James writes,

¹⁶⁰ Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita Ioannis Cantipratensis*, in ‘Une oeuvre inédite de Thomas de Cantimpré, la “Vita Ioannis Cantipratensis”’, ed. by Robert Godding, *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique*, 76 (1981), 257-316. Translation by Barbara Newman in *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints’ Lives* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), pp. 57-124.

¹⁶¹ *Vita beatæ Christinæ mirabilis virginis*, ed. J. Pinius in *AA.SS* 32, 24 July, V, cols. 650-660. English translation by Margot H. King and Barbara Newman, “The Life of Christina the Astonishing,” in *Thomas of Cantimpré, The Collected Saints’ Lives* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), pp. 127-157. Hereafter cited as *VCM*. For reference, chapter numbers will be given within the text.

was an example of the “holy virgins in the lily gardens of the Lord who scorned carnal enticements for Christ, despised the riches of this world for the love of the kingdom of heaven, clung to the heavenly Bridegroom in poverty and humility, and with the work of their hands, earned a sparse meal.”¹⁶² According to James, some of these women were despised by those who scorn spiritual people, “thinking them to be either insane or idiots” (*VMO* Pr. 10). However, despite the astonishing ascetic feats, intense piety, and transgressive lifestyle of these *mulieres religiosae* (who undertook suspect behaviors such as begging, living chastely yet uncloistered, and divesting themselves of familial wealth),¹⁶³ Christina’s actions alone merited the title “mirabilis.” James writes,

I saw (*vidi*) another in whom God worked so wondrously (*mirabiliter*) that after she had lain dead for a long time—but before her body was buried in the ground—her soul returned to her body and she lived again (*revixit*). She obtained from the Lord that she would endure (*sustineret*) purgatory, living in this world in her body. It was for this reason that she was afflicted for a long time by the Lord...But after she had performed penance in so many ways, she lived in peace and merited grace from the Lord and many times, rapt in spirit (*rapta in spiritu*), she led the souls of the dead as far as purgatory, or through purgatory as far as the kingdom of heaven, without any harm to herself (*VMO*, Pr. 8).¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Jacques de Vitry, *Vita Mariæ Oigniacensis*, ed. D. Papebroeck, in AASS, 23 June, V, cols. 542-572. English translation by Margot H. King, in *Mary of Oignies, Mother of Salvation* ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), Pr. 3. Hereafter cited as *VMO*.

¹⁶³ See Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 7; Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The historical links between heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women’s religious movement in the twelfth and thirteenth century, with the historical foundations of German mysticism*, trans. by Steven Rowan (Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1995), p. 91.

¹⁶⁴ “Vidi etiam aliam, circa quam tam mirabiliter operatus est Dominus, quod cum diu mortua jacuisset, antequam in terra corpus ejus sepeliretur, anima ad corpus revertente revixit; & a Domino obtinuit, ut in hoc seculo vivens in corpore, purgatorium sustineret. Unde longo tempore ita mirabiliter a Domino afflicta est, ut quandoque se volutaret in ignem, & quandoque in hieme in aqua glaciali diu moraretur, quandoque etiam sepulcra mortuorum intrare cogeretur. Tandem in tanta post peractam poenitentiam vixit pace, & tantam a Domino gratiam promeruit, ut multoties

Thomas elaborates James's description of Christina's revived body, giving it the miraculous ability to suffer impossible pains yet not die or be marked by its tortures. Unlike James, he understands Christina's sustaining of purgatorial punishment on earth not as a penitential act for herself, but for others, her soul having already achieved perfection.

According to Thomas, Christina was orphaned along with her two sisters in St. Trond (Sint Truiden) in the diocese of Liège. The sisters decided to construct their family life according to a semi-monastic model. The eldest lived in contemplation, and the middle sister became a housekeeper, while Christina, the youngest, took the humblest office of shepherdess. In the isolation of this task, however, Christina was given "the grace of an inward sweetness" and Christ "often visited her with heavenly secrets" (4). However, her contemplative life was hidden from all, "known to God alone," (4) a privacy that contrasts with the radical exposures of her later life.

This quiet, rather conventional life changed when, as a result of "excessive contemplation," she died and ascended to heaven. Along the way she passed through a place of such great horror and suffering that she thought it was hell, only to be told it was purgatory, a place of atonement (6). Arriving at the divine throne, she spoke with God, who offered her the choice of remaining in paradise, or returning to the flesh in order to

undergo there the punishment of an immortal soul in a mortal body without damage to it, and by these your sufferings to deliver all those souls on whom you had compassion in that place of purgatory, and by the example (*exemplo*) of your suffering and your way of life to convert living men to me and make them turn aside from their sins, and after you have

rapta in spiritu, animas defunctorum usque in purgatorium, vel per purgatorium sine aliqua laesione usque ad superna regna conduceret."

done all these things to return to me, having accumulated for yourself a reward of such great profit (7).¹⁶⁵

Her return involved three elements: First, an intercessory function, as Christina's earthly sufferings substituted for the purgatorial efforts of those souls already dead. Second, an exemplary—in the sense of didactic—function, as Christina's enactment of the pains of purgatory taught the living about purgatory and warned of purgatory's impending afflictions, thus goading her public to conversion away from their sinful lives. Third, the desire to win for herself a great reward (even though she was destined for immediate entry into heaven at the time of her first death).

Choosing to return to the flesh, Christina embarked on a program of bodily mortification that included rolling in fire, remaining in icy water, and living among the tombs of the dead.¹⁶⁶ Thomas tells us that she “act[ed] the part of her own torturer,” subjecting herself to judicial instruments of punishment like the wheel and the gallows (13). Christina was able to survive these afflictions because of the divine subtlety with which God endowed her resurrected body. Thus, while these various practices caused her immense pain (necessary for their penitential efficacy, in the exchange of agony for forgiveness), her body remained visibly uninjured (9; 11; 19).

Other remarkable properties of her flesh included a sparrow-like lightness that enabled it to hang from the slender branches of trees and to endure walking and standing at “dizzy heights” (15), echoing her initial flight “like a bird” into the rafters of the

¹⁶⁵“aut ad corpus reverti, ibique [agere pœnas] immortalis animæ per mortale corpus sine detrimento sui, omnesque illas animas, quas in illo purgatorii loco miserata es, ipsis tuis pœnis eripere: homines vero viventes exemplo pœnæ & vitæ tuæ converti ad me, & a sceleribus resilire, peractisque omnibus, ad me tandem multorum præmiorum mercede te cumulatam reverti.” Col. 0652A.

¹⁶⁶ *VMO*, Pr. 8; *VCM*, Pr. 1.

church following her resurrection (5). She was able to roll her limbs into a formless ball “as if they were hot wax” while praying (16). Her body, “like a phantasm,” entered deep rushing water and came out untouched. She was able to feed herself with oil and milk from her virginal breasts (9; 19). The shocking excesses of her actions, as well as the miraculous properties of her body, led family, friends, and the community to believe that Christina was possessed by a demon (9; 10; 17), a belief that resulted in her further torment at the hands of her sisters. They locked her up in a dungeon (18) from which she escaped only to be tied to a yoke and starved (19). Christina’s deeds, then, “were not done in narrow corners (Acts 26:26) but openly among the people” (Pr. 2). These deeds, Christina told her friends, “have not been seen among mortals” (*Nec enim talia visa sunt inter mortales*), and while they are performed “for the improvement of men,” they are “beyond understanding” (*super intellectum*).

The story then quickly turns to an account of the upheavals, disgust, and astonishment of the social body, which responded to Christina with horror. In Lutgard’s *vita*, we are told that a single priest viewed her body bloodied by contemplation of the passion; in Christina’s case the “many people” who saw her run through thorns “were astonished (*mirati sunt*) that there could be so much blood in a single body” (14). As news of this and other deeds spread, “[m]any people from far and near, even from the furthest regions, clustered around her every day to see the wonders God had wrought” (*multi pro videndis mirabilibus*) (20). Thus, Thomas introduces the semantic and conceptual field of “wonder” and its related terms into the *vita*, foregrounding wonder’s centrality to the telling of this story and its presence as a key effect that Christina’s life—in particular, her body—has on others.

André Vauchez notes that the ancient notion of saintly *virtus*, in which a kind of holy energy (*virtus*) manifested itself in bodily signs such as incorruptibility, healing relics, and a pleasant smell after death, was increasingly attributed to living saints in the later Middle Ages. From the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, the “supernatural aura” previously ascribed to saintly remains was now credited to earthly bodies.¹⁶⁷ The saintly human body became identified with the “glorious body,” including, by the thirteenth century, the body of Christ.¹⁶⁸ This glorious body was believed to escape the limitations of human nature, and it was marked by certain signs, such as a beauty revelatory of the soul’s inner reality, luminosity,¹⁶⁹ and the gift of tears.¹⁷⁰ With the inclusion of stigmatization as a sign of sainthood in the thirteenth century, a new lexicon of bodily signs appeared, one in which physiological similarity to the person of Christ became proof of the authenticity of sanctity. This shift, Vauchez argues, increased the marvelous aspect of sainthood, and gave rise to a new form of the marvel, namely, physiological marvelousness.¹⁷¹

Christina’s body participated in the trend noted by Vauchez in two ways. Through suffering, her body became identified with Christ’s; it was also an extreme instance of the physiological marvelousness characteristic of thirteenth-century hagiography. However, Christina’s body did not mimic the vulnerability of Christ’s body: while enduring infinite

¹⁶⁷ André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. by Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 435.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 435.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 438.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

pain, she remained unmarked, while Christ's resurrected flesh bore the marks of his crucifixion. Furthermore, although resurrected, Christina obtained only two of the qualities attributed by scholastics to resurrected bodies, those of *subtilitas* and *agilitas*, having neither *impassibilitas* nor *claritas*.¹⁷²

It seems that Thomas was attempting to portray a purgatorial soul by means of Christina's purgatorial body, describing in an earthly context the strange enfleshment of the soul undergoing physical torment. While theologians debated the precise nature of the soul's suffering in purgatory, it was generally agreed that the soul suffered by means of a "corporeal fire." Thus the Supplement to Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, incorrectly attributed to the saint, cited Gregory's *Dialogues* and Julian of Toledo as proof for the sensible suffering of the soul in purgatory; both asserted that the soul is held in hell by physical flames in the same way it is contained or imprisoned on earth by the body.¹⁷³ Thomas Aquinas argued that the pain of purgatory is twofold: psychological, involving both the agony of the delay of the divine vision, and sensible, for although the

¹⁷² On these qualities of the resurrected body, see the *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. Q. 82-85, a. 1. *Impassibilitas* is immunity from pain and death. *Claritas* occurs when the glory of soul is completely visible in the body, making it beautiful and radiant. *Agilitas* gives the resurrected body complete freedom of movement as the soul perfectly directs the body. *Subtilitas* entails the freedom of the body from material restraint while it remains palpable. While the *Summa* was composed approximately thirty years after the *VCM*, Steven Justice argues that Thomas Aquinas is a useful source for uncovering late medieval views because his writings were an attempt to systematize the instruction, preaching, dogma, and sacraments essential to pastoral care and to "excavate [its] presuppositions." Thomas is not, then, prescribing a view of belief but describing in systematic terms what is already operative in practice. See Steven Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in their Miracles?" *Representations* (103) (Summer 2008): 13.

¹⁷³ *ST* Suppl. Q. 70 a. 3.

purgatorial soul is separated from the body, “pain is not hurt, but the sense of hurt.” The bodily sensation of pain is, in fact, of the soul.¹⁷⁴

In addition to speculative theological traditions, Thomas may have partly drawn on the highly popular *Visions of Tondal* (ca. 1149) for his description of Christina’s flesh. Though this account describes bodies in hell suffering transformation through putrefaction, becoming “food” for fire and worms (an experience foreign to Christina), it also depicts the soul as a bird and a bubble, reminiscent of Thomas’s multiple references to Christina as a bird and her spherical shape when ecstatic.¹⁷⁵ However, Thomas altered these traditions insofar as he attributed the qualities of a purgatorial soul suffering corporeal fire to the body of a living saint on earth. Thus, while the Shades of the *Purgatorio*, including Virgil, were “aerial bodies,” existing between the states of death and resurrection, Dante, a living man, was differentiated from them by means of the shadow he cast.¹⁷⁶ Despite Christina’s purgatorial body, she, too, cast a shadow that horrified (46).

¹⁷⁴ *ST* Suppl. App. 1, Q. 2 a. 1. “In Purgatory there will be a twofold pain; one will be the pain of loss, namely the delay of the divine vision, and the pain of sense, namely punishment by corporeal fire...since pain is not hurt, but the sense of hurt, the more sensitive a thing is, the greater the pain caused by that which hurts it: wherefore hurts inflicted on the more sensible parts cause the greatest pain. And, because all bodily sensation is from the soul, it follows of necessity that the soul feels the greatest pain when a hurt is inflicted on the soul itself.”

¹⁷⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 293-4.

¹⁷⁶ The phrase “aerial bodies” is Bynum’s. *Resurrection*, p. 300-1. See *Purgatorio*, III.16-30 for Dante’s realization “the light was shattered” by resting on his body, but Virgil’s cast no shadow. Echoing the theological traditions I have noted here, while reflecting on the shadowless forms of Purgatory Virgil tells Dante “[t]he Power has disposed such bodiless/bodies to suffer torments, heat and cold;/how this is done, He would not have us know” (III.31-33). *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Knopf, 1984).

Scholars have offered multiple readings of this *Life*, seeking a key to unlock and perhaps reconcile the difficulties posed by her bizarre piety and flesh. Christina has been dubbed an hysteric whose illness was translated into the terms of religious intercession by a local clergy person.¹⁷⁷ She has been called a preacher of memorable bodily “sermons”¹⁷⁸ and a representative of the rise of the doctrine of purgatory and its female prophets.¹⁷⁹ Her strange flesh has been interpreted as an example of the bodily (and often grotesque) nature of high medieval women’s spirituality, which proceeded through an identification with the suffering Christ,¹⁸⁰ and, in contrast, as a prime example of the disembodied spirituality of elite clerical culture which constructs the grotesque female body as one that remains unwounded by affliction and thus is radically different than the tortured Christ.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ Barbara Newman, “Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century,” *Speculum* vol. 73 no. 3 (July 1998): 733-770.

¹⁷⁸ Robert Sweetman, “Christine of Saint-Trond’s Preaching Apostolate: Thomas of Cantimpré’s Hagiographical Method Revisited” in *Vox Benedictina* 10 (1) (July 1992), p. 68. Retrieved July 17, 2010 from GenderWatch (GW). (Document ID: 1001164971).

¹⁷⁹ Barbara Newman *From Virile Women to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 108-136; JoAnne McNamara, “The Need to Give: Suffering and Female Sanctity in the Middle Ages,” in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski et al. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 199-221.

¹⁸⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 30, 115, 120, 203, 274; Walter Simons, “Reading a Saint’s Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the *vitae* of Thirteenth-century Beguines,” in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. S. Kay and M. Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

¹⁸¹ Laurie Finke, “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision,” in *Maps of Flesh and Light*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), pp. 37-8. One could construct an interesting paper by arguing that rather than being a somber presentation of a saintly figure and the horrors of purgatory offered in earnest, the *vita* is an entertainment text, meant to amuse its readers by satirizing contemporary women’s piety.

As the multiplicity of these compelling, though often mutually incompatible readings attest, the strangeness of this text makes interpretation difficult. By mixing the fantastical and the mundane, citing and subverting hagiographical conventions, the *vita* elicits *and* refuses readers' attempts to interpret it. In this chapter, rather than attempt to reconcile or choose from among these interpretations, I am interested in the wonder itself, the astonishment that the text both represents, in the person of Christina, and quickens in its readers. By what rhetorical means is this wondrousness represented and performed? What are its effects? If the text is, in Mark Jordan's phrase, a "scene of instruction,"¹⁸² how does such spectacle serve Thomas's pedagogical interests? What are the functions of wonder in an exemplary text? What kind of reading practice did Thomas hope to inspire and form in his readers with this strange tale?

In this chapter, I will address the pedagogical function of wonder by way of a twofold consideration. First, I will examine the implications of the wondrous for exemplarity and its representation. I will argue that Christina's wondrousness is a result of her *unlikeness* to saintly precedents and the sinful humanity of her audience. I will then refract the question of representation and rhetoric through the issue of practice. If, as Edith Wyschogrod argues, the life of a saint is to be comprehended not in terms of an analysis of its meaning, but as a "practice" in which "the addressee is gathered into the narrative so as to extend and elaborate it with her/his own life," how did Thomas intend

¹⁸² Mark Jordan, "Missing Scenes," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, vol. 38, no. 3&4 (Summer/Autumn 2010). http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news/bulletin_mag/articles/38-34/jordan.html. Accessed July 6, 2011.

the reader to elaborate the miraculous, seemingly unobtainable strangeness in his or her own life?¹⁸³

Robert Sweetman has noted the important pastoral function of the wondrous in the *Life*, essential to the didactic message of her post-resurrection activities, which become, Sweetman argues, an extended exemplum. Unable to preach verbally, Christina preached “by example,” and her grotesqueries worked to provoke in her audience the “salubrious shudders that save.”¹⁸⁴ Christina preached purgatory by performing the pains that await sinners after death in her own flesh on earth. Sweetman further argues that Christina’s implausible and shocking deeds accorded with a Dominican theory of preaching, which held the fantastical, the hyperbolic, and the grotesque to be excellent tools for memory, penetrating the heart and mind more effectively because of their outrageousness. For Sweetman, Thomas’s *mirabilia* are edifying, peculiarly effective, *memorabilia*. However, as Barbara Newman notes, while persuasive, this explanation does not sufficiently account for the bizarreness of Christina’s acts. Sweetman diminishes the extremism of Thomas’s text, which is in continual danger of being derailed by the same marvelousness that gives its subject her divine authorization. Nor, I would argue, does Sweetman’s reading adequately describe the complex dynamics between observer and wonder, student and teacher, audience and saint.

In order to consider Thomas’s representation of Christina, I will turn to Pseudo-Dionysius’s theory of dissimilar similarities. I am here building on the work of David Williams who argues that insofar as it transgresses the limits of form and thus

¹⁸³ Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. xxxv.

¹⁸⁴ Robert Sweetman, “Christine of Saint-Trond’s Preaching Apostolate,” p. 68.

intelligibility, the monstrous in medieval aesthetic, literary, and philosophical discourses parallels the dissimilar image in theology, serving as a critique of rational discourse. Williams argues medieval grotesques and certain deformed saints are apophatic in the same way as is the dissimilar image: as a signifier, the monstrous “shows forth” (in the sense of *monstrare* as opposed to *repraesentare*) transcendence, its distortions pointing to a plenitude of meaning that cannot be captured by the mimetic representation of the natural (or divine) world.¹⁸⁵ Likewise, I will argue that Christina is a “dissimilar similarity.” I will argue that while Thomas made Christina as dissimilar as possible from models of female sanctity—going so far as to represent the saint as a demoniac—this dissimilarity ultimately became a mirror, and the distancing tactic of difference revealed a horrifying intimacy between Christina and her audiences, a horror essential to the practices of reading and behavior that Thomas hoped to inspire with this *Life*.

Dissimilar Similarities

The theory of dissimilar similarities is outlined in *The Celestial Hierarchy*, a text which considers the anagogical function of a variety of “sacred veils” that “upliftingly conceal” (121B) both the heavenly ranks and God, so as to make the soul’s return to its divine source possible. This concealment is anagogical, for the material veils—including odors, lights, the Eucharist, biblical images, and examples—simultaneously conceal and reveal divine truths in a form apprehensible by embodied humans. In their appearing, they act as a goad to the soul, which “interprets” (*anagogies*) such signs, these “material

¹⁸⁵ David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1996), p. 4.

means capable of guiding us” (121D), and thus ascends to the heavenly realm. Return (*epistrophe*) to the divine source through the activities and objects of ecclesiastical life (and in fact, through all created things, which are theophanies)¹⁸⁶ is possible because the earthly hierarchy is “modeled on the hierarchies of heaven” (121C). By virtue of this similitude, the texts, rituals, and objects of the church’s earthly life have the anagogic power to lift up and eventually “assimilate” the soul to the simplicity and inexpressibility of divine life. The devout move through the many—those specially placed “means”—to return to the triune One.

However, while material signs are able to lift the soul “from the perceptible to the conceptual” through a chain of similarity such that “appearances of beauty are signs of an invisible loveliness” (121D), Dionysius suggests an alternative anagogic function, one that radically attenuates the human capacity to approach God by way of an analogy between earthly and heavenly. This alternative anagogy he calls “dissimilar similarities.” He argues that while there are many names that seem to represent the divine majesty in a seemingly more appropriate manner due to their obvious connection to intelligible qualities (beauty, light, love, and life) the most *appropriate* names for God are those that are dissimilar to attributes human beings readily associate with divine majesty. As God is “far beyond every manifestation of being and of life...light...reason or intelligence” (140C), the name “worm” is more suitable for God than “being,” for it marks this divine difference. Those names which present a stubborn, intensified materiality “pay [the ranks of heaven] honor by describing them with dissimilar shapes so completely at variance

¹⁸⁶ See Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), p. 101 for an explanation of Dionysius’s notion of being as theophany.

with what they really are that we come to discover how those ranks, so far removed from us, transcend all materiality” (141A). In a word, dissimilar similarities perform a kind of apophysis, for they mark a breach in what is otherwise figured by Dionysius as the mimetically constituted chain of being reaching from heaven to earth, a breach which is cognitively apprehended by the person contemplating such dissimilarity.

Despite this breach, the dissimilar image remains anagogical; it is one form of the “uplifting veils” the treatise considers. The dissimilar image, like the similar, enables a dynamic of revelation and concealment that elevates the soul. As Paul Rorem puts it, while similar images reveal the divine in its similarity and relation to materiality, but conceal the distance between the creation and creator, dissimilar images reveal the transcendence of God, a revelation that conceals by ‘showing’ divine ineffability. Thus every divine name, every sacred veil, is both similar and dissimilar, a bridge and an abyss, an affirmation and a negation, though the dissimilar image is “more suitable” (141B) because dissimilarity confounds the expectations of the intellect, showing the one who speaks God’s name that human language cannot capture the divine essence.¹⁸⁷ All signs, whether sensible or intelligible, similar or dissimilar, are “relativized vis-à-vis God who infinitely transcends both.”¹⁸⁸

Dissimilar Similarity and Sanctity

¹⁸⁷ Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 56.

¹⁸⁸ Eric Perl, *Theophany*, p. 101. Perl is here referring to the distinction between the sensible symbols and intelligible names, but this distinction parallels and is structurally the same as that between the dissimilar and similar images.

In relation to what standard was Christina dissimilar? To what was she similar? As an uncloistered woman making claims to divine inspiration and practicing extreme bodily disciplines in public, Christina embodied a novel form of sanctity, one that needed to be framed in terms of older, already licit models of holiness in order to become legible, acceptable, and thus persuasive. As a kind of citational practice, Christina's sanctity iterated available models of holiness, both ancient and contemporary. However, this citation was performed in such a way as to emphasize Christina's *departure from* these models, rather than her participation in them. Thus her actions, while often continuous with those of saintly women, were either radically exaggerated versions of their behaviors, or were fundamentally recast by Thomas so as to be transformed and thus become "dissimilar" to that with which his audience is familiar. The models Thomas invoked include the virgin martyr, the desert mother, and the high medieval beguinal holy woman. I will here examine each of these types, showing Christina's continuity and discontinuity with them in order to ultimately demonstrate the atopic nature of her saintly practice.

The Virgin Martyr

Virgin martyr tales were highly popular in the Middle Ages, adapted throughout the period more frequently than those of any other female saints.¹⁸⁹ Generally the stories involve a young girl who makes a vow of virginity, which antagonizes her family and the powerful pagan man who is in love with her. When she refuses to retreat from her resolution or will not make a sacrifice to the pagan gods, the girl is persecuted and killed.

¹⁸⁹ Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 5.

The stories display explicit, often sexual, violence, as frequently the virgin is stripped naked in the course of her persecution or, like Agatha, has her breast torn off with pincers.

The most significant debt the *VCM* owes to the virgin martyr tradition is the graphic depiction of horrifying violence performed on virgin flesh. Like her predecessors, Christina was a young virgin who underwent tortures, and so became a spectacle for her community, who witnessed a female body distorted and bloodied for the sake of her faith. She was tormented on the wheel made famous by St. Catherine. She echoed St. Agatha's healing by Peter in prison when she refused the ministrations of a human doctor and allowed only Christ to cure her (18). Like Thecla, she baptized herself (21). Like the martyrs, a key component of Christina's asceticism was her suffering persecution by her community, including her own family.¹⁹⁰

However, unlike the virgin martyrs of late antiquity, Christina became her own torturer; her actions were the performance of God's will, arising because of an agreement with him. The virgin martyr legend was thus reframed within a theology of substitutionary atonement. Rather than submit to martyrdom as a witness to the virtue (in the sense of both power and goodness) of a victimized community and their God, Christina's agonies made visible the power of God who was now the persecutor. To those

¹⁹⁰ While Laura Finke argues that Christina's sufferings are self-inflicted and thus very different than a virgin martyr's death at the hand of the state, questions of agency are difficult to neatly compartmentalize in these situations. A common trope of virgin martyr tales is the insistence of the virgin to refuse clemency that is repeatedly offered, so that the martyrdom can be said to be "chosen," even as Christina's tortures, though chosen and executed by her, are typically described as being the result of a divine agent by whom she is driven to undertake painful acts. This drivenness can in part be understood as a quality of her resurrected flesh which, like that of the elect whose resurrected bodies manifest *claritas* by virtue, as the author of the Supplement to the *Summa Theologica* puts it, of the overflow of the soul into the body, is said by Thomas to be almost entirely "controlled" by the spirit (46). Whether that spirit is God or Christina's own is not specified by the text. On *claritas*, see *ST Suppl.* Q. 85 a. 1.

who observed the wracked flesh of his “most beloved,” she revealed the depth of his wrath and the promise of further torment. Christina’s sufferings were both pedagogical and substitutionary, teaching those who witnessed her pain of the suffering that awaited them in purgatory, even as she decreased purgatorial penance for others.

The exposed female flesh that dominates both the ancient tales and Thomas’s text is also fundamentally different in each context. The *VCM* transplants the virgin martyr into a resurrected body, one that can experience pain yet not die. Thus, unlike the martyr whose agonies are subsumed in the exaltation of sacrifice (which was often described having an anaesthetic effect), or who is dispatched relatively quickly, Christina’s pain takes on a supernatural magnitude, as no mortal wounds interrupt her torments. Pain, not death, is the focus of the tale. The semi-divine body, which cannot be wounded or die from its torments, paradoxically becomes the site and spectacle of human vulnerability. Thus the sign of Christina’s supernature—her suffering yet unwounded body—marks her distance and difference from the rest of humanity, but also most deeply connect her to the human condition. Conversely, Karen Winstead argues that constant assurances that the virgin martyr feels no pain in passages that explicitly describe macabre tortures was used in the legends as a distancing technique, mitigating the compassion readers feel for the martyr. The mortal flesh of young virgin martyrs displays the armor of faith, the miracle of body so subsumed by the confidence of the soul it does not flinch, and in this imperviousness—*apatheia*—enters a miraculous space, one unreachable by the astonished crowd who marvel, are edified, but do not pity.¹⁹¹ The alignment of soul and body in Christina, on the other hand, is governed by an affect not of triumph or

¹⁹¹ Karen Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, pp. 73-75.

confidence, but of penitential sorrow and empathic suffering. It gave rise to a similar empathy in her community, and presumably the readers of her *vita*, who came to see her as holy.

The Desert Mothers and Fathers

The language of wilderness is prominent in the *vita*, echoing not only the desert tradition of ascetics like Antony or Syncletica, but the early Cistercian vision.¹⁹² Christina is said to flee “into deserted places, to trees, or the tops of castle or church towers, or any lofty structure,” as she “desired to remain alone with God in her hiding place in the desert” (9).¹⁹³ Like both Antony and Syncletica, whose *vitae* were popular in medieval Europe, Christina retreated to the tombs (13) and practiced rigorous renunciation, including giving away all her possessions, fasting, and practiced strict celibacy. She also spent time with the recluse, Jutta. Margot King has argued that the description of Christina floating up to the tops of trees is a continuation of dendrite and stylite practices of late Antiquity.¹⁹⁴ However, as we saw with virgin martyrs, the site of repetition is also the place of difference. Withdrawal to the wilderness occupied only one pole of Christina’s movements, contrasting with her wandering through the public square, exposures of her flesh, and subjecting herself to the gaze of the crowd, a performative note that is indebted to the virgin martyr legends.

¹⁹² See, for example, the *Exordium Parvum*, ch. 3, which speaks of Citeaux as a “desert.”

¹⁹³ Brenda Bolton first noted the connections between Thomas and James of Vitry’s work and the desert tradition in her essay “*Vitae Matrum*: A further aspect of the Frauenfrage,” in *Medieval Women: Essays dedicated and presented to Prof. Rosalind M.T. Hill*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), pp. 253-275.

¹⁹⁴ Margot H. King, “The Desert Mothers,” in *Vox Benedictina* 5/4 (October 1988), pp. 325-354.

Desert ascetics taught those who sought them out (often despite their own best efforts to flee). Athanasius depicted Antony returning to Alexandria in order to seek martyrdom,¹⁹⁵ and described his illuminated form emerging from his tomb to amaze crowds of people.¹⁹⁶ Similarly, Symeon acted not only as a figure ascending ever more closely to heaven but a savvy political advisor and negotiator.¹⁹⁷ Syncletica was depicted teaching women interested in the ascetic life, as are the Abbas of Cassian's *Conferences*. Yet the *ideal* articulated by the desert literature is *anachoresis*, for the flight from worldly interaction is an essential mark of humility. In the *Life and Regimen of Blessed Syncletica*, the hagiographer Pseudo-Athanasius emphasizes the relation between humility, withdrawal, and secrecy and the resulting difficulty of his writerly task: "We cannot speak, then, of her actual ascetic life, since she did not allow anyone to be an observer of this. Nor did she wish her associates to be heralds of her heroic virtues. For she did not so much think about doing good as she did about keeping her good works private and secret."¹⁹⁸ Conversely, the very purpose of Christina's works and Thomas's writing is to display them in all their terror to act as a lesson to "[t]he many people who had frequently seen" her acts of mortification. The performance of abjection further served as an occasion for the penance of others, as a wicked man from whom she begs a

¹⁹⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, "The Life of Antony," in *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. by Alan C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), ch. 46, p. 65.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 14, p. 42.

¹⁹⁷ See Peter Brown, The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 61 (1971), pp. 87-88.

¹⁹⁸ Pseudo-Athanasius, *The Life and Regimen of the Blessed and Holy Teacher, Syncletica*, trans. by Elizabeth Bryson Bongie (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1997), ch. 15, p. 15.

drink was “moved by an unaccustomed pity” and thus redeemed himself (23). Christina’s acts of self-mortification were not so much ascetical practices, then, as simulacra of ascetic practices, insofar as she gained nothing nor learned anything for herself but acted as tableaux for spectators.

It is not only Christina who was displayed as a bizarre and baffling image. Her public mission entailed her exposure to horrifying sights. This is in dramatic contrast to the behavior prescribed for virgins and ascetics by Syncletica, who argued that it was “imperative” for ascetic women that

sallies out into the marketplace be avoided. If we consider it troublesome and oppressive to see our brothers and parents naked, how much more harmful it will be for us to view on the streets people indecently clad and, even worse, speaking licentious words? For it is from these experiences that disgusting and virulent images arise.¹⁹⁹

As teacher and counselor, however, Christina suffered knowledge of the sins of others:

“She always walked about as if she were dying or grieving, for God daily revealed to her whether those who were near death merited salvation or destruction” (26). She saw the “hidden sins” of others whom she admonished (29).

Finally, the purpose and end of Christina’s *askesis* was radically different than that of desert fathers and mothers. Having been perfectly purified in the solitude of contemplation and then dying, the self-mortification Christina underwent was not for the purpose of cleansing her soul and body as Syncletica “trimmed the thorny offshoots of her thought,”²⁰⁰ nor for attaining God in solitude, but to teach and intercede. The *agon* with the murderous pagans in virgin martyr legends, which became the *agon* with the

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., ch. 25, p. 20b.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., ch. 17, p. 16.

thoughts in the case of the desert mothers (thus Syncletica is compared to Thecla),²⁰¹ became with Christina, instead, a struggle with the sins and punishments of *others*, a struggle notable for its unabashed passion. Christina's perfection, then, was not like Antony's, who, his body having been "worded" (*logisesthai*) and assimilated (*idiopoieon*) to the divine, manifested remarkable equanimity when it emerged from the fortress where he had encased himself for twenty years.²⁰² Again, Christina's story subverts the logic of asceticism, assimilated to the work of Christic substitution, a perfect being who exceeded even Christ in the variety and duration of her suffering. Thomas's version of Christina's life explicitly emphasized this shift in contrast to James of Vitry, whose description of Christina described her mortifications as acts of personal penance that only later become intercessory.²⁰³

Mulieres sanctae

Thirteenth-century male-authored hagiography of holy women tended to foreground the body of the female saint as the site of divine manifestation. While intense asceticism and physical piety was present in some high medieval male Lives, a focus on paramystical practices and bodily acts such as trances, levitations, fasting, miraculous

²⁰¹ Ps. Athanasius, *The Life of Blessed Syncletica*, ch. 8, p. 11-12. "One could consider her the true disciple of the blessed Thecla as she followed her in the same teaching. Indeed, Christ was the one suitor of the two women, and for them both Paul was himself the 'leader of the bride.'"

²⁰² Athanasius, *Vie D'Antoine, Sources Chretiennes*, vol. 400. Introduction and translation by G.J.M Bartelink (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2004), §14, p. 272. "The state of his soul (*psyche*) was one of purity (*katharon*), for it was not constricted by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection...He maintained utter equilibrium, like one guided by reason (*hypo tou logou*) and steadfast in that with accords with nature (*en to kata physin*)."

²⁰³ *VMO*, Prologue 8.

exudings and lactation were more common and played a more central role in the construction of models of female sanctity.²⁰⁴ Male hagiographers inscribed the spiritual on the flesh of female saints, making the woman's body—particularly in states of abjection and pain—sites at which the divine became discernible in the world.²⁰⁵ According to Dyan Elliott, the emphasis on eucharistic devotion and penitential practices in such hagiographies was an essential part of the Dominican program against heresy, in which the saint was “sculpted” to “confound the [Cathar] heretic,” who critiqued the Catholic Church's sacramental system and propounded doctrines of dematerialization.²⁰⁶ The incredible acts of Christina's resurrected body, particularly its tortures, pain, exudings, ecstasies, and rapturous songs, conform to this general trend of emphasizing the bodily nature of women's piety noted by scholars. Christina's bodilines, however, is an extreme instance of this broader somatizing trend.

The *VCM* is unimaginable apart from its predecessor, James de Vitry's *Life of Marie of Oignies*. The *vita* was written for Fulk of Toulouse who, fleeing the “Egypt” of his own city taken over by Cathars, found the Promised land in Liège, drawn “in particular” by the “holy women who venerated the Church of Christ and the sacraments

²⁰⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast Holy Fast*, pp. 260-76; Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, pp. 181-238; André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 433-443; Rudolph Bell and Donald Weinstein, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 123-27, 153-57, 236-7.

²⁰⁵ See the work of Amy Hollywood for extensive discussion of this hagiographical practice, including *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 26-39; *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 241-253; “Breaking the Waves and the Hagiographical Imagination,” Unpublished talk,” p. 1.

²⁰⁶ Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 2.

of the holy Church” (Pr. 1). According to James, these devout women practiced celibacy, fasts, prayers, vigils, poverty, maintained a devotion so intense that some were “wasting away with such an intimate and wondrous state of love,” while others were rapt with inebriation, held immobile or jumping up and down ecstatically,²⁰⁷ or were possessed by a violent need for the Eucharist. Marie, whose story stands *pars pro toto* of the somatic feminine piety of the region, was offered as a counter-example to the Cathar *perfecti* (Pr. 9), and the *vita* was intended to be used as a source for anti-Cathar preaching.²⁰⁸

Thomas’s *vita* not only borrowed James’ authority for the defense of his tale, but intensified the somatic, dramatic, quality of Marie’s ascetic piety. Elements of this piety that Thomas imitated included the marginally unorthodox practice of begging—from which Marie was convinced to desist by her friends, while Christina carried it out²⁰⁹—

²⁰⁷ *VMO*, Pr. 6, 7, 8.

²⁰⁸ Carolyn Muessig, *The Faces of Women in the Sermons of Jacques de Vitry* (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1999), p. 42.

²⁰⁹ Female mendicancy inspired profound suspicion and was a major cause for suspicion of beguines, which is why Marie’s friends encourage her to refrain from it (*VMO*, II.45). That Thomas depicts Christina begging in no less than four chapters (22-25) is further evidence of his flagrant courting of suspicion. Furthermore, although theological justification is given for her activities, carried out as a form of substitutionary atonement and in order that she may become an occasion for good works, Thomas also writes that she would take things that were refused her without offering explanation for it. As Jennifer Brown asks, if this criminality is an exemplum, then how is it to be read? (*Three Women of Liège: A Critical Edition of and Commentary on the Middle English Lives of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Christina Mirabilis and Marie d’Oignies* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), p. 238). A similar ambivalence underlies Thomas’s presentation of Christina hearing Count Louis’s confession (44). Although he is eager to point out that she does not offer absolution, for she has no such right, the text does not say that he received any other last rites. In hearing his final confession, Christina performs what was the official prerogative of priests and, furthermore, does in some sense ‘absolve’ Louis of half of his sins through her bodily torment (45). While commentators have argued that this passage distresses Thomas, it seems to me he could have massaged the tale far more than he has (or left it out entirely) in order to mitigate the centrality of Christina in the death scene. As things stand, she is represented in a tableau with Louis draped at her feet recounting his sins from his eleventh year to the present. He then disposes of his goods according to Christina’s advice. Thomas’s presentation of priests is ambivalent in general in this *vita*. While he has Christina proclaim her devotion to the clergy (40), he also notes that they persecuted her “often,” misrecognizing her sanctity. On the whole,

purgatorial piety involving intercession and substitution for others, preaching indirectly whether through deeds or, in Marie's case, James, and most dramatically, rapturous states—meaning those encounters with divinity in which the soul is separated from the bodily senses—that extended for unprecedented lengths of time.²¹⁰ Bernard McGinn notes that while earlier monastic literature, including that of authorities such as Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux, stressed the impossibility of the body sustaining states of alienation from the senses in an encounter with God for long periods of time, *The Life of Marie* described beguinal women remaining enraptured, sometimes for days on end.²¹¹

However, while the bodily emphasis of these *vitae* was essential to the ecclesiastical fight against Catharism undertaken by James and Thomas, it was not without controversy. Thus in the Prologue to the *Life of Marie of Oignies*, James, addressing Fulk of Toulouse, writes there were “shameless men...hostile to all religion, [who] maliciously slandered the religious life of these women and, like mad dogs, railed against customs which were contrary to theirs.”²¹² In the *VLA* Thomas writes that James was attacked by a “vile slanderer” who “said and wrote that those who record the fantastic visions of insignificant women ought to be considered profane.” This slander, he

Christina performs their office more efficaciously than they, counseling (29, 30, 41), preaching sublimely (27, 28, 29, 40), offering not the Eucharist but her own body as substitution, and hearing the confession of a great sinner. As Barbara Newman notes, and as my argument attempts to show, Thomas is primarily invested in demonstrating the novelty and even unintelligibility of Christina, and he does this through such controversial representations, some of which remain un- or under-theologized, and thus unintelligible. See Newman, *Possessed by the Spirit*, p. 765.

²¹⁰ For an account of late medieval understandings of rapture see Dyan Elliott, “The Physiology of Rapture,” in *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*, eds. P. Biller and A. Minnis (Rochester NY: York Medieval Press, 1997).

²¹¹ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, p. 38.

²¹² VMO, Prologue, 10.

continues, was inspired by James's writing "the blessed life of the blessed woman Mary of Oignies in an elegant style" (*VLA* 1.5). Thomas thus knowingly courted further disdain from certain quarters with his portrait of a woman whose body and behavior foregrounded without reserve the qualities of a controversial piety. Rather than mitigating his rhetoric in the face of maligners and doubters, Thomas placed Christina in a resurrected body, thus removing mortal limits to her practice. The effect of such extremism was to make a further outlier of the already marginal figure of Christina. She became a figure for an alterity best figured by Thomas in the terms of the demonic.

Walter Simons argues that Christina's raptures are represented in such a way as to open themselves to demonic interpretations. He shows that in beguine Lives of the southern Low Countries, a corpus that includes the *VCM*, there is a new "grammar" of movement in the representation of virginal ecstasy. When Marie of Oignies (d. 1213), Ida of Louvain (d. c. 1300), Elizabeth of Spalbeek (d. 1304), or Christina moved into an enraptured state, proportion was said to be lost as limbs swelled and elongated, or they were described as becoming as wax, molded into a round ball or whirling like a hoop. The gestural palate expanded and the body departed fundamentally from the ideals of bodily moderation, grace, modesty, and balance extolled by Ambrose in his treatise on virginity.²¹³

Simons argues that the *vitae* placed descriptions of rapture alongside conventional deeds and virtues that were indicative of sanctity as well as her conformity with older ideals of bodily propriety. In other words, however shocking these depictions of rapture

²¹³ Walter Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the *vitae* of Thirteenth-century Beguines," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. S. Kay and M. Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 14. See Ambrose, *De Officiis* I.108, ed. *PL* XLV, col. 16.

may have been, they existed discretely within the *vitae*, contextualized by behaviors that would be recognizably saintly to readers, behaviors that served to mark as holy the ambivalent acts of rapture. Such a contextualization is apparent in the *Life of Margaret of Ypres*. Although Margaret underwent constant and prolonged raptures, she had the comportment and face typical of the ideal virgin, for “[she] ordered [her] outward appearance after the example of all the blessed ones. Her eyes were downcast, her head bent, her bearing subdued, her gait light and moderate. Her countenance was so reverent that angelic grace and a hint of majesty glimmered in her face” (VMY I.12). This sort of contextualization was vital, as Simons notes, for beguinal ecstasies were indiscernible from those produced by demons. Ecstasies could be deemed divine only by locating the outrageous, bizarre, or offensive behaviors of the putatively holy person within the wider context of their behavior, reputation, and spiritual gifts. Thus charisms, including clairvoyance and the stigmata, the experience of a person’s virtue by others in the community over an extended period of time were essential to the determination of sanctity. Most important, Simons notes, was the interpretation of the female saint’s hagiographer, who acted as the ultimate arbiter of discretion, investing these acts with their authoritative interpretation and approval.²¹⁴ *Vitae* were written after the struggle over the discernment of a person’s status, and the hagiographer’s writing of a *Life* sought to confirm the meaning of such actions.

There is, then, a persistent tension in these Lives. The novel bodily evidence of divine presence that was used to forward an anti-heretical program, acting as both embodied dogma (of the goodness of creation and therefore the sacramental system

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

governed by the church), and as proof of a woman's sanctity, authorizing her visionary, prophetic, or theological claims, needed to be accompanied by recognizable virtues to become legible and safe.²¹⁵ Paramystical practices (such as trances, levitations, stigmata, and the alienation from the senses that rapture entailed), and claims of visionary experiences could not, Simons argues, stand alone as signs of divine favor.

However, in the *VCM*, the disharmony and disruption Simons ascribes to states of rapture obtain for a great proportion of the *vita* and occur not only in those states specifically described as rapturous, but mark Christina's general *habitus*. For example, even after God "moderated his miracles" in her in order to make her less scandalous to the community (21), Thomas writes that when Christina lamented the fate of those in hell and purgatory, she "wept and twisted herself and bent herself backwards and bent and re-bent her arms as if they were pliable and had no bones" (26). Similarly, she twisted her limbs and rolled around when asking why the world did not "recognize its Creator" (37). She danced with abandon when saved souls died (26). She wore gowns made of unmatched pieces of cloth sewn together with the bark of a linden tree, and went barefoot, becoming a spectacle in direct transgression of traditional direction to virgins (and women in general) to practice modesty of dress and speech and to avoid the gaze of

²¹⁵ Thus Lutgard is given various observable physical graces, such as being suspended in the air (I.10), and having the sun descend upon her in the night (I.11) in order to prove her unique status to fellow nuns. The literal cracking, breaking apart, and burning up of Beatrice of Nazareth's body is presented as an apt "translation" of her interior spiritual life by her hagiographer (Compare Beatrice's Treatise, "There Are Seven Manners of Loving," p. 203, trans. by Eric Colledge, in *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth A. Petroff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), and the anonymous *Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, trans. by Roger DeGanck (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), p. 308-11. Elizabeth of Spalbeek enacts horrifying representations of the passion, becoming, as the Middle English translator has it, "booth the persone of Criste suffrynge and the persone of the enmye turmentynge," but this performance is observed with no attempted intervention by fascinated clerics. See "The Middle English Life of Elizabeth of Spalbeek," in *Three Women of Liège*, ed. Jennifer Brown, p. 105.

others.²¹⁶ Finally, in the last year of her life, the anti-social strangeness that characterized the beginning of her intercessory career returned and “solitude and the wilderness were frequently her home.” When she did return to human society,

People could scarcely tell whether a spirit or a material body had passed by, since she barely seemed to touch the ground....the spirit so controlled almost all the parts of her corporeal body that scarcely could human minds or eyes look at the shadow her body cast without horror and a trembling of spirit (46).²¹⁷

This pervasive weirdness means that the scandal of Christina’s body was not confined to discrete moments of rapture, which might trouble but ultimately not capsize the more fundamental value of moderation and proportion Simons finds in the other *vitae* he studies. The *VCM* does not provide a wider context of normalcy against which Christina’s more bizarre behaviors could be judged or by which their power might be attenuated.²¹⁸

²¹⁶ See for example Ambrose of Milan, *On Virgins*, Book One, 8.53-10.57; Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 16.4-17.5.

²¹⁷ “Cum reverteretur, nemo eam salutare, nemo aliquid interrogare audebat. Vespere enim aliquando revertens transibat per mediam domum quasi spiritus super terram: vixque discerni poterat si spiritus transibat aut corpus, cum terram vix tangere videretur. Adeo enim in illo extremo vitae suae anno in omnibus fere partibus animale corpus sic spiritus obtinuerat, ut humanæ mentes vel oculi vix possent ejus corporis umbram sine horrore & tremore spiritus intueri.”

²¹⁸ Christina is not limited to the bodily sphere by Thomas and her preaching is often verbal, such as when she tells townspeople about purgatory (28), reproaches the unrepentant (37), speaks “with wondrous grace of speech” in front of the knights of Count Louis, and acts as confessor to the same Count (44). However, these deeds are themselves ambivalent and do not serve to make her strange body less transgressive or necessarily intelligible as a holy rather than a demonic force. As R. Sweetman argues (“Christine of St. Trond’s Preaching Apostolate,” p. 68), such verbal preaching by a woman outside the confines of the cloister was a violation of canon law. Furthermore, Jennifer Brown and Anneke Mulder-Bakker note Thomas’s ambivalent representation of Christina hearing Count Louis’s confession (see Brown, *Three Women*, p. 240). While Christina hears his full confession on his deathbed, and at other times would “obtain from him whatever was owing for the satisfaction of justice,” (41) a function uncomfortably close to assigning penance for post-Lateran IV sensibilities, leading Thomas to say that she understood

Thomas thus brought to a point of crisis the covert tensions of contemporary Lives by foregrounding the ambiguity implicit not only in the ecstasy of other holy women, but the representation of female holiness through bodily abjection. He displayed the difficulty of reading the body by showing the community's aggressive reaction to Christina; the first half of the tale is shaped by the dynamic of a spectral Christina entering and again fleeing human community as she, like a dystopic version of the bride of the Song of Songs, was pursued and captured multiple times by her sisters, the community, and a bounty hunter. The unlikeness of ecstatic beguines is thus radicalized in Christina's excesses, a central means by which Thomas emphasized her alterity to her public. She became an abject alien, straining to be elsewhere, a grotesquerie of the anachoretic impulse repeatedly performed for crowds of onlookers and skeptics.

While Thomas's belief in Christina's sanctity is implied by the very fact of his writing her *Life*, he does not describe the hostility of the community as taking place against an obvious innocent. Instead, Thomas's rhetoric in some ways colludes with and justifies the cruelties of Christina's enemies. Their reading of Christina as possessed is repeated in Thomas's representation of Christina through the language of the demonic and the horrifying, forcing the reader to undergo the same act of interpretation as the villagers of Liège. She was said to have been "kept in check" (*constricta*) by the sacrament and "forced" (*coacta*) to come down from the rafters after her resurrection (5); she ran from dogs like a "fleeing beast" (*bestia fugiens*) (14), paralleling the "beastly minds" (*bestiales mentes*) of her persecutors. All of this behavior is typical of demoniacs,

that she did not inhabit a priestly role and did not offer an absolution "she had no power to give." However, as I argued above, the ambivalence of the story occurs because Thomas's depiction flirts with her giving exactly what she had no power to give.

as is the language of being seized (*commota*), stirred (*agitata spiritu*) or driven (*cogebatur*) that Thomas ascribed to her (10, 21, 22, 24). Again, she fled humans because of their stench (9), and ran from the priest after receiving communion, which Barbara Newman notes was “reminiscent of an angry demon resisting an exorcist,”²¹⁹ and crossed the dangerous river, though “in a real body” (*in vero copore*) as if a “phantasm” (*quasi phantastico*). Newman further includes her distortions of limb and voice and her bodily mortifications as emblematic of demoniacal behavior, as was the horrified response of the townspeople who captured, beat, starved, and later, fled from her.²²⁰ While Newman offers conjectures that the description of Christina as a demoniac was indicative of historical realities—arguing that her mental illness was “consecrated” by priestly translation into the terms of intercessory suffering for the debt of sin owed by others—the rhetoric of demonic possession can also be understood as the essential component of Thomas’s construction of Christina as a dissimilar image, a bearer of hyperbolic unlikeness for the purpose of attaining particular rhetorical effects with his readers.

Thomas thus drew on multiple models of female sanctity in order to construct Christina. In each case, however, he fundamentally altered the inherited models, making them unlike themselves. This strategy placed Christina within the tradition in such a way as ultimately to reinforce her difference from it. In each case, the point of contact and divergence from the paradigm was located in her body. In the case of the virgin martyr, Christina’s resurrected flesh turned the equanimity of the martyr to pathos, adding the essential component of pity to the crowd’s marveling. In the case of the desert mother, the withdrawing ascetic was simultaneously a public spectacle, exposed to the gaze of the

²¹⁹ Barbara Newman, “Possessed by the Spirit,” p. 764.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 764.

crowd even as it was exposed to her gaze, disrupting the equanimity of both. In the case of the *mulieres religiosae*, Christina's difference occurred by means of a radical exaggeration of their somatic piety. This exaggeration rendered Christina the other of an already marginal group ultimately best captured by Thomas's use of the discourse of the demonic.

Miracle as Mirror: Two readings of the Dissimilar Image

Having considered the extent and nature of Christina's unlikeness to the very models on which Thomas draws in telling her story, I will now turn to the question of the rhetorical effects on the reader who observes and must interpret the dissimilar image that is Christina. I will first return to the theory of the dissimilar image, arguing that there are two ways in which it can be read that can, in turn, be applied to a reading of the *VCM*. I will then consider in detail the category of wondrous horror in the *vita*.

The unresolved tension between analogy and abyss, between the connection of God with creation and the absolute divine the hierarchy mimetically derived from the exemplar and the exemplar *in se*, enables two possible readings of the effect of dissimilar similarities. On the one hand, if the distinction between like and unlike remains stable, the contemplation of a dissimilar image will deliver the intellect up to an experience of its failure; the observer regards the unlike in order to apprehend his or her distance from God and inability to approach the intelligible through material means. This would be an apophatic practice of capsizing the intellect, breaking it through contemplation of the unlike. David Williams argues that the monstrosity of medieval grotesques and certain deformed saints performs this apophatic function, acting as dissimilar images in a

properly expansive application of theology. The monstrous reveals or affirms transcendence by concealing or negating similarity to the natural world, thwarting the mind's ordering and analogical capacities. Monstrous deformations point to the deformation of the intellect necessary to the pursuit of understanding divinity. The "Middle Ages made deformity into a symbolic tool with which it probed the secrets of substance, existence, and form incompletely revealed by the more orthodox rational approach through dialectics."²²¹

In mixing the categories of the living and the dead, of past, present, and apocalyptic future,²²² being both herself and yet another insofar as her actions were the result of being "driven by the spirit," and in the deformations of her flesh in rapture and lamentation, Christina's body can be identified as monstrous—revealing to the mind that contemplates her ineffability its limits. The observer could be said to look on her unlikeness and contemplate it as such, thus confronting the limits of the human understanding of divine things, a confrontation in which she or he nevertheless maintains his or her position in relation to the observed object. In other words, the observer would remain "similar" insofar as she or he is unlike the dissimilar saint. The ineffable other would, by virtue of its excessiveness, remain distinct.

²²¹ David Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 3.

²²² On the connection between temporal deformity and ontological deformity, Williams notes the work of Geoffrey Galt Harpham, who argues that the creation of the grotesque occurs by attaching in one moment the different phases of a creature's being, "with the intervening temporal gap so great that it appears that species boundaries, and not mere time, has been overlapped." Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 11. Quoted in Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 5. As resurrected, Christina's body is both a realized eschatology, attaching the flesh of earthly life with the qualities of the afterlife, even as her terrifying practices open the door between this world and the next, unveiling the future in the present, a future caused by the sins and virtues of the past.

However, there is a second way to read the effect of dissimilar similarities, one that takes account of the fact that *all* images are dissimilar to God as all names mark and instantiate a distance between God and the world. This interpretation would argue that the dissimilarity of all images from God undoes the very particularity of the saint as dissimilar, thus implicating the observer in the unlikeness of the contemplated image. Christina's bodily vulnerability becomes the observer's bodily vulnerability, her monstrosity their monstrosity. The observer not only scrutinizes the strange spectacle but is rendered strange by it. The apophasis of the intellect that obtains in the first explanation for dissimilar similarities is therefore extended, in this second reading, to an apophasis of the subject, an undoing and refiguration of the viewer as he or she is replaced within a landscape newly recognized as a *regio dissimilitudinis*, a world rendered apocalyptic by Christina's performances of coming punishment. It is this extended apophasis, I would argue, that drove Thomas's attempts to turn Christina from the amazing but not impossibly miraculous *beata* of James's prologue to a figure who is purely *mirabilis*.²²³

Such an understanding of dissimilar similarity can be considered "prophetic." Prophets stand over and against the social order and are not to be emulated. Instead, the prophet satirizes his audience by imitating it. Thus the prophet Hosea performed Israel's "adulterous" relation to God by marrying a prostitute, at God's command naming his daughter "not loved," and his son "not my people" (Hosea 1:2-9). The actions of the prophet, though bizarre and seemingly utterly outside of typical social behavior, hold up a mirror to society. Their seeming unlikeness is in fact a critical likeness. The wonder

²²³ Thanks are due to Charles Stang for helping me formulate this second reading of the dissimilar similarities.

they inspire has its source in the likeness the lies under the veil of unlikeness, and the horror when this likeness is registered is the impetus for conversion.

Like the Hebraic prophets, the *VCM* repeatedly shows such a mutual imbrication of saint and community. The vision of the saintly other refracts back onto the observer, becoming mirror rather than spectacle. Christina's mission was marked by both dramatic lamentation for human sin (13; 26; 37; 45; 50) and by "becoming" sin, in her enactments of purgatorial pain in which she is both example and substitute (7). Christina took on the sinner's debt of others, including the souls she first saw in purgatory, and her spiritual child Count Louis, with whom "she suffered torments in turn according to what the soul of the count was suffering," having taken on half of his purgatorial punishments (45).²²⁴ Her role as substitute was extended in her mendicancy, in which her body became the body of the publicans, a becoming figured literally by her ingesting of the scraps from their table.²²⁵ The sight of an emaciated woman dressed in white rags sewn together with bark or twigs (25), revealing the torments the purgatorial body undergoes at the hands of demons (28), not only warned viewers of their looming future, but revealed to them their *present* state. Her body became the body and soul of usurers. After eating alms wrongly

²²⁴ On the "apostolate to the dead" of female saints, and the theological underpinnings of substitution, see Barbara Newman, "On the Threshold of the Dead," in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, pp. 108-136.

²²⁵ Christina's ingestion of publican garbage, such that her body is made by their trash, becoming as trash, and thus revelatory of their souls is reminiscent of a passage from Margaret's Laurence's novel, *The Diviners*, in which Christie, the town garbage collector (and as his name indicates, like Christina's, a Christ figure), speaks of the way that a person's garbage reveals their private information: "You know how some have the gift of second sight?...Well, it's the gift of garbage-telling which I have myself now. Watch this...Now you see these bones here, and you know what they mean? They mean Simon Pearl the lawyer's got the money for steak. Yep, not so often, maybe, but one day a week. So although he's letting on he's as hard up as the next—he ain't, no he ain't, though it's troubling to him, too. By their christly bloody garbage shall ye know them in their glory, is what I'm saying to you, every saintly mother's son..." (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 61).

acquired that tasted as the “bowels of frogs and toads,” she uttered a plea that shows the complex relation of possession, desire, and subjectivity arising from her mission. Crying out first to Christ, she asks, “What are you doing (*agis*) with me?” reflecting the text’s view that it is God who drives her actions and performs the punishments that she endures. She then addressed her own soul, saying, “O miserable soul! What do you want? Why do you desire (*concupiscis*) these foul things?” suggesting that it was not only her body that requires food, but that her soul was in some sense infected by the sinners’ carnal desire for ill-gotten gains. The confession of her soul’s desire, which was really the desire of the other, thus ventriloquized the prayer of a penitent publican (24), performing the fulfillment of her mission that such sinners “might thereby be called to a horror of their sins and a penitent life.” Christina’s proleptic verbal penance thus paralleled her substitutionary purgatorial penance of the flesh.

Christina’s piety was also shown to have a contagious effect, not only generating fear in the face of her multiple prodigious performances, but also sympathy in those exposed to her. Thus her wild grief for the damned dead, in which she “wept and twisted herself and bent herself backwards and bent and re-bent her arms and fingers as if they were pliable and had no bones,” could not be ignored by those around her. Rather, “[a]ll who saw her found her sorrow so intolerable that even the hardest-hearted could not endure it without the greatest contrition and compassion” (26). Again, in her bridal ecstasy, in which she sought to “praise Jesus for the great liberality of his miracles,” she would call the nuns of St. Catherine’s to her and they would sing together the *Te Deum Laudamus* and “rejoiced in Christina’s solace” (36). As Christina was “moved” (*commota*) by the spirit to flee the town (10), so her wretched appearance moved

(*commoto*) a “most wicked man” to an “unaccustomed pity,” and he gave her wine against all expectation (23). The charity of sinners inspired by Christina’s appearance was thus paralleled by her possession by the Holy Spirit. The interiority of Christina’s interlocutors was transformed by means of her contagious presence.

The primary movement Christina’s presence inspired, however, was not charity or renunciation, but horror. Astonishment in this text occurs in the register of the horrifying, one that from its initial appearance among the villagers was experienced as threatening. Astounded by the horror of the torments of hell, a place that is “dark and terrible” (*horridum*) (6; 28), she agreed to be driven by the divine and thus was horrified (*horrebat*) by human smell (5) and human sin. Her own horror turned Christina into a horrifying sight, terrifying (*horrentes*) her audiences by means of her horrifying (*horrifice*) cries, deeds, and voice (11; 20; 43) up until the very end of her life, when even the shadow cast by her body caused “horror and trembling of the spirit” (*horrore et tremore*) (46). The contagion of horror moving from Christina to her audience and back again is most apparent in chapter nine when she is said to flee human presence “with wondrous horror” (*miro horrore*), the horror here being both that which she felt for other humans, and that which she inspired in her onlookers.

Such horror is essential to her mission, according to Thomas, and a key effect that he seeks by means of his hyperbolic, astonishing, atopic representation. Begging, we saw, was intended to call sinners “to a horror (*ad horrorem*) of their sins and a penitent life” (22), and her exhortations called the dying to a “fear (*horrorem*) of the destroying fire.” This fear is central to the pastoral aims of the book, for it is the origin of the

structure and reformed behaviors of a pious life, including confession, penance, and the “hope of everlasting joy” (27).

The audience’s horror is also Thomas’s solution to the conundrum of credibility raised in the beginning of the *vita*. The wondrous horror that provoked the bewilderment of villagers and readers, leading them to acts of misinterpretation in which they read Christina as demonic (9; 10; 17; 19; 20) or to disbelief in the story as simply outlandish fabrication, was also the means by which Thomas attempted to achieve resolution to the problem of the text’s credibility. As I have shown, the story turns around Christina’s body, the site of her unlike likeness and her fearsome wonder. Although she preached with both words and deeds,²²⁶ it was her body that is “example” and her deeds that had substitutionary power. While her body as resurrected was singular, the bodily effects of her acts depended on the common ground between her miraculous flesh and that of her community and her readers. As Amy Hollywood notes, Christina’s suffering not only provided a theological justification for God’s torture of sinful human beings and proof of the capacity of some to bear the sins of others, but is a “process of validation” that occurs in the bodies of readers. She writes,

The reality of the immaterial divine is made evident through the suffering body of the saint. The reader’s horrified bodily response to her suffering in turn becomes a bodily manifestation of God’s presence and the reader’s belief.²²⁷

Christina’s body, shaped by a vision of horror even as it becomes such a vision, inspired a similarly physical horror in her viewers. Furthermore, as I have argued, Thomas believed his desired effect would be contagious because Christina showed the audience

²²⁶ See Robert Sweetman, “Christine of St. Trond’s Preaching Apostolate,” p. 68.

²²⁷ Amy Hollywood, “*Breaking the Waves* and the Hagiographical Imagination,” p. 24.

themselves as they already are. The vision is a recognition. Thomas's melodramatic tale with its heroine's excessive materiality seeks bodily effects in its readers that become the living proof, if not of Christina's historicity or even sanctity, then of the reality of purgatorial punishments and the wrath of God. The physical piety of women, typically used in order to justify visionary claims or find kinship with the human Jesus, was here placed in service of proving the threat of damnation and, by that fear, reforming behavior. Belief was thus "inscribed" on the bodies of penitents, as horror and belief were united in Thomas's penitential theology,²²⁸ and the divine bridegroom who fleetingly appeared in the fourth chapter of the *vita* was replaced by a vengeful God who is "driven" (*cogebatur*) to punish sinners.²²⁹ However, the text continues to register the difficult circularity of the proving body. This difficulty points to a broader problematic, highlighted by the excessiveness of the *VCM*, of the representation of female sanctity through the suffering body.

I have demonstrated how female sanctity in the thirteenth century was often depicted in highly somatic terms, as wracked and tormented female flesh was pressed into service as the site of God's visible earthly manifestation. Much of Thomas's work followed this trend. For instance, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres* admiringly cites the extreme *askesis* of a young woman who died at twenty-one as a result of her practice. Margaret was a teenager when the Dominican friar, Zeger, "cast his eyes on [her]" as she

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

²²⁹ God's action upon Christina (both in terms of "driving" her deeds and in showing her his purgatorial realm) is often described with the verb *cogere*, which contains the sense of force acting upon someone or something. In using the verb to describe the necessary punishment God inflicts on sinners, Thomas implicitly suggests that God is the actor in a drama played out on the stage of necessity, in some sense not responsible for the tortures he inflicts, merely obeying the dictates of a law that requires the careful balance of mercy and justice.

sat in secular clothing with other women in church. He saw with “divine instinct” her election as God’s “chosen vessel” (6). Zeger persuaded Margaret to abandon thoughts of marriage and family and pursue a life of virginity. Though she began to “relapse” a day or two following her conversion, she, like Lutgard, was able to turn her stirrings of “affection” (*motu animi affectum*) for a young man to the “lasting affective knowledge” (*perseverantem cognitionis affectum*) that began to flow into her at her conversion (7), and she made a private vow, becoming “espoused (*sponsata*) to Christ” and “escaped the nuptials of the world” (8). She began to live the life of a tertiary, undertaking an ascetic and contemplative regimen in the confines of her mother’s home but under the watchful eye of her confessor, Zeger. Of her deeds, Thomas writes:

She very frequently scourged herself even to the shedding of blood. A child of three could barely have lived on the food she ate...If any table companion urged her to take a morsel, she seemed quite unaware of the food, and when her mother rebuked her and asked why she paid no attention to it, she would sigh and say, “I have many things to think about which distract my mind elsewhere.” Often she fasted continually for two or three days, eating nothing, and she scarcely ever had anything to drink (16).²³⁰

In addition to her fasting, scourging, and concentration on otherworldly things, Thomas writes that Margaret practiced extensive vigils and perpetual prayer (17), that she wore “wretched clothing” (22), begged for alms on behalf of the lepers (22), had an intense eucharistic devotion (24), and performed scrupulous confession (28). Despite his

²³⁰ “Frequentissime quidem accipiebat usque ad effusionem sanguinis disciplinas. Vix puer annorum trium vivere cibo posset, quo illa degens in carne vivebat, et tamen oportebat quod a circumsedente socia ad unamquamque fere bucellam, quasi cibi nescia, moveretur, et cum corriperetur a matre, cur non intenderet cibo, illa suspirans: “Multa, inquit, habeo cogitare, que me alias distrahunt.” Sepe diebus duobus aut tribus continuabat ieiunia, quod non comedit. De potu vero fere continuum erat, quod non bibebat. A vino et carnis et cibis delicatis penitus abstinebat” (ch. 16, p. 114).

assurance that her *askesis* “proves that the human body can do and endure many great things without harm to itself, far beyond what carnal people believe, but especially when love endures them all” (17),²³¹ and that her deeds were endured “without self-destruction” (17) (a principle he took to miraculous ends in the *VCM*), a dominant note in Thomas’s depiction was Margaret’s persistent weakness and weariness (19; 21; 26; 40). This frailty acted as a foil to the virility of her asceticism, and rhetorically serves to shame the complaining “powerful woman” and “strong and bearded man” to whom, along with Friar Zeger, he addresses the *vita* (17).

Despite Thomas’s assurances that her way of life caused her no harm, Margaret’s weakness culminated in the definitive ascetic act of her life—the extensive illness she endured with longsuffering (48). Like Christina, Margaret performed the entirety of her purgatorial penance while in the flesh. In addition to her ascetic practice, Margaret’s *vita* details her multiple paramystical experiences. She experienced ecstatic raptures that persisted for many hours (18; 20; 28; 30; 44), visions (24; 31; 32; 35; 37; 39), and was “ravished every day by an ardent desire for contemplation” (*cum aviditate contemplacionis cotidie raperetur*) (21).

Dyan Elliott has shown how the identification of female sanctity with the body ultimately served to detract from women’s claims to holiness, for the body that acted as proof of sanctity and warrant for certain claims and deeds was (as indeed the *VCM* shows) difficult to interpret. She argues that Thomas, with an “intense appetite for supernatural marvels” remained “optimistic” about the capacity of the body to give

²³¹ “tenella iuencula evidentissimum signum invenio, quod corpus humanum, super id quod carnales credunt, sine detractone sui multa potest et magna, maxime vero ubi amor omnia tolerat” (ch. 17, p. 114).

obvious marks about its source of inspiration, whether demonic or divine.²³² The theological tradition became increasingly apprehensive about the evidentiary status of the body, and by the end of the fourteenth century the genre of spiritual discernment was ascendant, and typically introduced physical markers of spirituality only to discredit them. This shift left women, still identified with the body, without its previous authority and ultimately open to accusations of witchcraft.²³³ However, while Thomas confidently uses *topoi* of the holy female body and its paramystical feats, his corpus reveals the problematics of such representations of contemporary female sanctity, and, I would argue, his own discomfort with it.

This discomfort is registered in Thomas's acknowledgement that the wondrous horror that is the source of the text's believability is also the cause of its unbelievability, and of the persecution that Christina suffered at the beginning of her new life. Her pain was registered as a threat by witnesses, and, despite the rhetorical and bodily force of her suffering, it required an act of interpretation to understand that threat as being in the service of salvation. Thus, the vividly rendered body, which irresistibly engendered bodily effects in readers still required interpretation by villagers and by readers. Perhaps out of the anxiety concerning the way in which the body is both problem and solution, Thomas repeatedly represented such interpretive moves on the part of the villagers, in both their misrecognitions and their recognitions. While the message of purgatorial punishment, the sinfulness of humanity, and the wrath of God stands forth clearly in the text, their visibility depends on the suffering flesh of a female saint in a way that renders

²³² Dyan Elliott, "The Physiology of Rapture," in *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*, ed. Peter Biller and A.J. Minnis (York Medieval Press, 1997). p. 154.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

them unstable, as God's activities could be the devil's, and the effects of horror inspire not a flight from sin, but from the saint. This instability in the *VCM* intensifies that which is found more generally in the use of bodily proof in the lives of holy women.

By the time of the *Life of Lutgard*, written fourteen years after the *VCM*, Thomas had retreated from such representations of holy women and, I would argue, offers an autocritique of his previous representational strategies. Mirroring the increasing cloistering of his figures, with Lutgard's *vita*, composed in 1246-8, he writes about a cloistered nun rather than an itinerant saint, and in passages I will discuss in the final chapter of the dissertation, he locates the wondrous primarily in the interior life of contemplation rather than the body. We move from spectacle in the public square to the hidden recesses of the cloister, unavailable to the gaze. When Thomas does describe bodily spectacles in the *VLA*, he is careful to offer allegorical readings that delimit the interpretive scope of a reader (thus solving the interpretive conundrum of the *VCM*) and that spiritualize the physicality of the event. The bridal language that governs the representation of Lutgard appears only briefly in the *VCM* when it is used to describe her first incarnation as a shepherdess who contemplated God in privacy and innocence, as God's "secret" lover.

Margot King argues that the bodiliness of the *VCM* must be understood "sacramentally," its physicality performed *ad significandum gratiam* (a scholastic phrase Thomas uses in the *VLA* to explain why oil flowed from Lutgard's fingertips) (I.16), and thus is reducible neither to a pure literalism or spiritualism, but rather proof that "through

the material universe...God works for the salvation of humanity.”²³⁴ King understands Thomas’s tripartite structure of the *Life*, divided, he says, into stages telling of how she was nourished (*nutrita*), educated (*educata*) and her deeds (*eius gesta*), to be a version of William of St. Thierry’s animal, rational and spiritual stages in the growth of a soul, mirroring Thomas’s explicit invocation of William in the Prologue to Lutgard’s *Life*.²³⁵ King offers her argument as a refutation of what she terms Simone Roisin’s “literal” reading of the *VCM*, in which Roisin contrasts the bodiliness of the *VCM* with the “mature” spirituality of the *VLA*.²³⁶ However, while I have noted that the physicality of thirteenth-century hagiographical depictions of female saints was intended both to make the divine visible, and to act as a defense of the sacramental system, King’s reading obscures important differences between the *Lives* of Christina and Lutgard, differences that indicate not only a shift in the status of the protagonist—from beguine to Cistercian, and from the God who is driven by wrath and justice to one who is a lover obeying the rules of courtly etiquette—but also, perhaps, a discomfort with the mode of representation that dominated his previous works. Unlike Roisin, however, I would not account for this discomfort in terms of a new maturity arising from exposure to the greater sophistication of the Dominicans or scholastics, for as I have argued, it seems that the difficulties with such representation are registered within the *VCM* itself, particularly

²³⁴ Margot H. King, “The Sacramental Witness of Christina *Mirabilis*,” in *Peaceweavers*, ed. Lillian Shank et al. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), p. 158.

²³⁵ King, “Sacramental Witness,” p. 149

²³⁶ Simone Roisin, “La Méthode Hagiographique de Thomas de Cantimpré,” in *Miscellanea Historica in Honorem Alberti de Meyer I* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l’Université, 1946), pp. 546-7.

around the issue of belief, proof, and interpretation whose circularity Thomas is ultimately unable to escape.

Therefore, when Thomas does occasionally offer proof of Lutgard's sanctity by means of the shedding of her blood or spectacular ascetic and contemplative feats, he qualifies them with reference to her interior state. For example, when a vein in Lutgard's heart burst, turning her into a "second Agnes," (I.21), Thomas transforms the red martyrdom of the virgin martyr into the Cistercian's "white" one for, God told her, "by your desire you have equaled her martyrdom in blood." This same passage also notes that this miraculous flow of blood was "witnessed" to by the "termination of the nuisance with which God tamed the pride in the sex of Eve." Thus not only is Lutgard's blood made efficacious by her "desire," requiring the participation of the will in order for it to become a "martyrdom," but it led to the erasure of that blood that was a vital mark of her femininity. The blood that was central to the representation of the asceticism of female saints, including Christina and Margaret (whose hair, like Lutgard's, seeps blood, and whose most powerful relic was her bloody head dress) (*VMY*, 45), is made dependent on Lutgard's interiority. Likewise, when a spying priest watched Lutgard's skin and hair become "bedewed" with blood as she contemplated the Passion, he was able to cut off a piece of her hair as proof of the astonishing phenomenon. However, Thomas oscillates in this passage between describing the voyeur's experience in active terms, such that he "sees" the blood (*video*) in a physical sense, and only *seeming* to be seen (*videor*). This tension arises as Thomas attempts to narratively capture and defend his contention that her "body outwardly drew its likeness" from the "intellectual consideration of her mind" (*ex intellectuali enim consideratione mentis, interius, similitudinem traxit corpus*

exterius) even as he needs to provide external proofs of sanctity (VLA II.23).

Part II

Modeling the Impossible: Exemplarity, Astonishment, and the Singular

Contemporary medievalists and medieval pastoral guides have long had recourse to the distinction of those saintly actions that are *ad imitanda* and *ad admiranda*.²³⁷ For pastors, the distinction safely bracketed for their flock the transgressive and even dangerous quality of some saintly actions. Scholars follow clerical lead here, offering the distinction as a way of neatly classifying the bizarre acts of certain saints. The “admirable” is read as an edifying spectacle, while its extremism or miraculousness holds it at a safe distance from ordinary people who are meant to regard it with awe, but understand it as not having any purchase on the practice of everyday life. Yet I have shown that, paradoxically, the same wondrousness that makes Christina a horrifying specter draws her closer to her audience, for it is in fact she who imitates them, and they who must imitate her abject penance in order to ultimately avoid looking like her. The horror she inspires is horrifying precisely because of what is shared between the prophetic saint and the sinful community. The *VCM* thus shows the distinction and relation between what is *imitanda* and *admiranda* to be far more complex than the

²³⁷ See for instance James of Vitry in his *Life of Marie of Oignies* where the distinction is invoked as a way of coping with the intense anxiety some of Marie’s ascetic practices cause for him. He writes, “I do not say these things to commend the excess but so that I might show her fervour.... Necessary things are not to be taken from the poverty of the flesh, although vices are to be checked. Therefore, admire rather than imitate what we have read about the things certain saints have done through the familiar counsel of the Holy Spirit” (*VMO*, II.12). James thus leaves the tricky issue of discernment for the reader who must decide, “through the familiar counsel of the Holy Spirit” what is to be imitated and what is to be admired.

simplicity of the binary would suggest. The need to articulate a separation between admiration and imitation may in fact be taken as evidence of an anxiety that these categories are not easily separable and that saintly ideals are inherently destabilizing and dangerous. In the first part of this chapter, admiration means, as its etymology suggests, looking into a mirror, one that in its radical dissimilarity from expectations of sanctity, hagiographical traditions, and social order, reflects a horrifying and yet moving image. Hence the pathos Thomas wrests from the equanimity of the types of the virgin martyr and the desert mother. Christina's peculiar type of horrifying marvelousness does not distance her, but depends on and ultimately reveals her nearness to her audience. Christina's bizarre unlikeness, so seemingly singular and thus admirable in the sense intended by clerics, in fact makes a general claim upon the social body.

In its unrestricted use of astonishing horror as both a theoretical category and rhetorical strategy, exemplarity in the *VCM* occupies a unique place in Thomas's corpus. While the exemplars offered by Thomas typically function as a model for self-fashioning, Christina performs a warning, becoming not what her viewers aspire to imitate, but a manifestation of the human present and its concomitant future. In the *VCM* we have seen an instance where the *imago* is deformed by exaggeration, monstrosity, and unlikeness, in order to imitate the deformity of its audience who, having renounced their likeness to God, wander in the *regio dissimilitudinis*. However, while the tale clearly manifests a classic use of the exemplum as warning, Christina is not only a prophetic instance of dissimilar similarity but also saint. In her resurrection and miraculous intercessions, she performs a more literal *imitatio Christi* than any other saint, including Francis. What then, of the imitation of her audience?

The literal, complete, showing forth of divine goodness is, strictly speaking, impossible. Thus the first reading of dissimilar similarity I offered also applies to the *vita*, insofar as divine distance requires that any representation of divinity fail. No verisimilitude is possible in the signification of God, hence the appropriateness of the monstrous figuration of the saint, for whom the saintly vocation always requires, in Edith Wyschogrod's phrase, to "show unrepresentability itself," displaying "how impossible it is to bring divine life into plenary presence."²³⁸

For Wyschogrod, this impossibility is due to the fact that the paradigmatic power of Christ and his saints derives from their transcendent ground, an infinity to which finite beings have no access, thus making the injunction to imitate Christ one that can never be fulfilled in its entirety. Thomas's text would agree with this view, though the rhetorical form by which it is expressed is radically different: the *vita* suggests that to perform the literal imitation of Christ is to be formed according to that image *and*, in some very real sense, deformed, inhuman, monstrous. The stakes of divine and human interest are presented by the *vita* as radically opposed. One exists at the expense of the other. The *vita* thus shows the unlikeness of humanity and God and the irreconcilability of the two realms.

While I have examined the way in which Christina's unlikeness is in fact a critical likeness, her monstrosity remains. The realization of Christina's prophetic likeness does not dissolve her horrifying difference from her audience, as the description of her spectral body in its last days attests (46). Thomas not only portrays a saint who is admirable in the sense of being a mirror, but one who is admirable in what I have called the clerical sense

²³⁸Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, p. 13.

of being an inimitable wonder. Thus, in terms of the question of the imitation *of* Christina, she remains largely singular. In addition to the scandalous nature of much of her practice, which I have discussed above—including her mendicancy, itinerancy, as well as her acting as confessor and preacher—her imitation of Christ is miraculous, miming (and even outdoing) not only his human life, but his resurrection and physical sacrifice, becoming a sin offering for others. Thomas's text thus participates in the practice of placing a fence around sanctity through the turn to the category of the admirable (in this text explicitly marked by the semantic field of the marvelous (*mirabilis*) and wonderful (*admiranda, mira*), as that which is singular and thus inimitable. In her miraculous imitation of Christ, Christina partakes of that transcendent ground Wyschogrod notes would typically apply only to the Son of God.

However, because Christian sanctity is a mimetic practice based ultimately on the imitation of Christ enjoined of *all* Christians, the binary between imitation and admiration is ultimately incoherent. The instability that inheres within this distinction is the cause of the persistent danger and potential radicality of texts such as the *VCM*. At which point and in what regard is a person to be named admirable, a safe spectacle, and not imitable? Who defines such limits, particularly at a time like Thomas's, when the practices of piety are undergoing great change in the wake of Lateran IV, the upsurge of lay piety begun in the Gregorian reforms, the new demographic and economic realities? Those qualities that render Christina astonishing are the sources of her authority as cultural critic and prophet of purgatory even as they are what most fundamentally marginalize her, perhaps to the point of rendering her tale irrelevant to readers.

I would argue that Christina's singularity is the primary place where Thomas genders her sanctity. Christina's singular wondrousness makes her worthy of being remembered in hagiographical form, even as her singularity renders her less dangerous to the status quo. Insofar as she is admirable in the clerical sense, rather than as a mirror, she may become something like an amazing curiosity.

Gendering Particularity: A Comparison with *The Life of Abbot John of Cantimpré*

The other of Thomas's Lives that focuses on the figure of a preacher, and his sole *Life* of a man, is that of Abbot John of Cantimpré. A comparison of the two Lives reveals important features of the gendering of particularity and the formation of sanctity in Thomas's corpus. This gendering, I will show, is most importantly apparent in the construction of the singularity (and thus inimitability) of Christina and the imitability of John. Both John and Christina are master preachers, but while Christina preaches primarily through a marvelous body, John is figured as one who inspires horror, compunction, and mercy primarily through "marvelous eloquence" (c.f. *VJC* II.9), though bodily performance and language are important to both. Christina's singularity will be shown to be a function not of the mission of preaching or its message, which is the same for both Christina and John, but of the means of such preaching and its effects. While both John and Christina inspire compunction, horror, and wonder, the relation of each preacher to their message is vitally different. Christina's message is tied to the particularity of her person, in particular, her body. John's message, I will show, is very differently related to his body, and the *vita* constructs him, in some ways, as incidental to the telling of his own *vita*.

Thomas's tale of the itinerant priest is a wandering one; the narrative structure of the text recapitulates the traveling of John's word throughout the region of Brabant. Putatively arranged around the figure of John, the *vita* is oriented not around the titular hero, but according to an associative logic that collects exemplary tales directly about John, those whom he has converted, institutions with which he was connected, and edifying tales Thomas relates by virtue of his own desire to preach that have nothing to do with John at all. Proof of John's sanctity is manifested the depiction of multiple figures converted by his holiness, preaching, and counsel. The *life* is constructed by means of a series of examples that describe the "fruits" of his public mission. The example of the saint is proven by other examples. This structure of repetition generates a proliferation of John's figure by means of his preaching, but it is also the means of his displacement. While the *Life of Christina* concerns the ecstasies of its peculiar subject, Thomas presents the *Life of John* as an ecstatic narrative: "Since I have strayed (*excessimus*) very far from the purpose of my narrative—albeit fittingly and usefully—let me now return to the story I set out to write" (*At quoniam propositi nostri narrationem, licet congrue et utiliter, longe ualde excessimus, ad id tamen ad quod singulariter stilum intendimus reuertamur*) (II.8b). Such straying occurs repeatedly, as does Thomas's tendency to draw attention to the wandering nature of his tale, a wandering he contrasts with the intent of focusing "singularly" on John.

However, while this digressive structure displaces John from the center of the narrative, it paradoxically demonstrates the power of his preaching. John's presence and actions may not always be explicitly named, but the content of the preaching of this

“exemplar of the twelfth-century evangelical movement”²³⁹—humility, poverty, penance—remains the implicit referent of each exemplum. It is this reference that governs the content of the text. Thus Thomas justifies one instance of his narrative itinerancy, writing: “The marks (*insignia*) of our holy father sparkle in and through everything” (II.5).²⁴⁰ The singularity of John as a figure and a body is translated or dissolved into the general terms of the evangelical message he preached. This translation means that the exemplarity of John’s *vita* is found less in the details of his particular biography (though such details are richly offered) and more in the content of his preaching, made available to and imitable by all his hearers. It is this treatment of singularity and the parameters and possibility of imitation that constitute the key difference, I would argue, between the Lives of John and Christina.

The associative quality of John’s *life* shows his to be a life that is ultimately replaceable. Exemplarity is figured as a type of repetition. John’s preaching is represented as being so transformative that his listeners become worthy of having their own mini-*vitae* and encomia inserted into his own. Thus the center of the *VJC* consists of an extensive *life* of Lord John of Montmirail, with most of the material derived by Thomas from the *Vita Ioannis de Monte-Mirabili* by a monk of Longpont. If not precisely converted by John, for Thomas had only heard that his conversion had come about through a “horrible sign” (*horroris signum*), John of Montmirail was led “by constant exhortation...to such a sublime degree of perfection that he restored all the goods and riches he had violently extorted from his subjects, and the fragrance of his humility and

²³⁹ Barbara Newman, “Introduction,” in *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints’ Lives*, p 23.

²⁴⁰ “per omnia et in omnibus sancti patris micant insignia.”

sanctity wafted throughout France and Germany” (II.8b).²⁴¹ Despite their differences—John of Montmirail is a nobleman who renounces worldly wealth, while John of Cantimpré is a man of humble beginnings whose artisanal parents somehow managed to send him to Paris for an education²⁴²—Thomas creates a palimpsest in the stories of the two Johns. One the preacher, the other the convert, who, like his spiritual father, becomes poor and humble and by means of his conversion, preaches through dramatic displays of restitution and humility. Thus he kisses a leper so that the “noble prince’s face [was] smeared with blood and pus,”²⁴³ and returns all his ill-gotten gains to his victims with an elaborate public ritual that includes a symbolic suicide. In a final layering of sanctity and mutual witness, Thomas appends a description of Marie of Oignies, “whose life was written by the venerable James...with outstanding eloquence,” though it left out many miracles enumerated by Thomas. Thomas justifies the inclusion of Marie by claiming that John of Montmirail’s death was divinely revealed to her.

We see a similar instance of biographical displacement when Thomas recounts the foundation of the woman’s house at Prémy. Thomas breaks into an extended description of Iueta, who had, like John, “renounced worldly riches and pleasures because of [John’s] preaching” (II.3). Iueta, in turn, was imitated by other noble matrons and virgins, including Anastasia de Croisilles and Mathilda de Fontaine, whose activities at Prémy are then related in two subsequent chapters. A further instance of this

²⁴¹ “ipsum ad tam sublimem perfectionis gradum exortatione sedula perduxisse ut, restitutes rebus et copiis que per uim a se subiectis extorserat, per omnem pene Galliam atque Germaniam humilitatis ac sanctitatis illius odor celebris spargeretur.”

²⁴² Ibid., p. 23. See *VJC* II.1.

²⁴³ “De hoc, illud insigne admirationis refertur piaculum quod, leprosum horrenda facie fedum, sanie per ora scantentem suppliciter osculates, propria exutus ueste contexerit.”

embedding of narratives occurs when Thomas includes elaborate biographies (“for the sake of posterity”) of the seven men who first joined John at the priory (I. 15-16), detailing their qualities, tasks, gifts, miracles, and, in the case of Hilliard, perfidy.

The description of John the *vita* purports to offer is thus often performed by means of the descriptions of others who are the “fruits” his preaching (II.8b), offshoots of the “seeds of his word” (II.9) (*semina uerborum*). Conversely, descriptions of others can become descriptions of John. Thus his mother’s epitaph depicts her as the “happy mother of this church’s father,” and tells that “as vision shows” she was released from purgatory by John’s prayers. John is “a faithful son,/True in life as in belief.” The poem acts as an exemplum illustrating John’s virtue even as it proves the possibility of intercessory prayer for those in purgatory (II.2).²⁴⁴

A second structure that contributes to the itinerant narrative of the *VJC* occurs in the exempla intended to illustrate and attest to John’s manifold virtues. Insofar as these anecdotes are meant to describe John, they are somewhat dependent on the frame of the *vita* for their intelligibility. However, despite this dependence, the majority of these exempla could stand alone as compelling narrative units illustrating doctrinal lessons as much as John’s gifts. For example, the story told to illustrate John’s power as a confessor and counselor relates a tale of a murderer who, stricken with compunction, confesses her guilt to John before undergoing the ordeal (II.6). Having compassion, John absolves her, whereupon she passes the ordeal even as her brother, either unrepentant or confessed by a

²⁴⁴ “Clauditer hac tumba simplex sine felle Columba/Moribus ornate mulier Theoberga uocata,/Ex utero cuius surrexit conditor huius/Ecclesie primus. Etiam sub puluere scimus/Quod precibus dignis hanc purgatorius ignis/Inuexit celis: Vir uita mente fidelis./Nec quis meretur hoc si potuisse putetur/Eius tunc natus prece iam uirtute beatus.”

less saintly priest (the text is unclear), is shown by the fire to be guilty. This tale is proof of John's compassion and priestly efficacy, but it is also an *exemplum* illustrating the mortal importance of confession, for "there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nothing hidden that will not be made known" (c.f. *BUA* 1.24.3; II. 27.2; Luke 12:2).²⁴⁵

In another *exemplum*, intended to illustrate the fruit of John's fasting and prayers, Thomas tells of the noble Walter of Flos, victim of the "contagion of heretical depravity" (*prauitatis male propagata contagia*) in Cambrai, who disbelieved the doctrine of transubstantiation. Hearing of this, John interceded with prayers and fasting, with the result that Walter "suddenly beheld (*vidit*) in the priest's hand a boy of such elegant beauty that he could by no means doubt (*ut neququam posset ambigere*) that this was the newborn child...this was nothing and no one other than the One who is daily hidden beneath the veil of the bread" (I.10).²⁴⁶ The story not only provides signs of John's *virtus*, but acts as a "proof" of transubstantiation and as a lesson in how to understand the meaning of the Eucharist, addressing the doubt and ignorance of readers.

As these examples show, as a good preacher, John is entirely in the service of his penitential message. These examples are used to paint John's portrait, but John is so entirely congruent with their lessons of Eucharistic piety and the necessity and power of confession, that no gap exists between John and the message he preaches. There is no remainder beyond the borders of his priestly function. Entirely aligned with the dogmatic lessons he expounds, his authority derived *ex officio*, he is in some way absorbed by these

²⁴⁵ "Sed quia nichil opertum quod non reueletur, neque absconditum quod non sciatur..."

²⁴⁶ "Mirum per omnia pulchrum spectaculum, sed non aliud uel alius quam qui sub nube panis cotidie uelabatur. Hec uidens horrore prosternitur, peractoque misterio salutary, pedibus sancti sacerdotis aduoluitur."

lessons. John thus tends to become a medium or occasion for the illustration of a larger moral, and is in some sense incidental to his own story. He becomes entirely his office.

In contrast, in the *Life of Christina*, such an alignment between office and character is impossible. Christina's excessive, atopic body renders her ever in excess of what she preaches, and this excess is the source of her wondrousness. Her deeds, putatively in support of orthodox practice, such as her promotion of confession, are ambiguous if not explicitly heretical because her body is the wrong gender and unordained. Likewise, as Sweetman notes, her most fundamental practice of preaching is suspect insofar as it exceeds the bounds of her "office" as woman.²⁴⁷ The marvelousness of her body in regard to her pastoral functions consists not only in its miraculous properties, then, but its sex. Furthermore, her life of poverty and penance is so hyperbolic as to become possible folly, and this poverty is the cause of her controversial itinerancy and theft.

The itinerancy of the *vita Ioannis* structurally performs the notion of preaching Thomas celebrates. John's erasure and reiteration in the figures of others who are the fruit of his word enacts the humility and poverty that are the center of his mission as a follower of the *vita apostolica's* call to preaching, poverty, and penance. John "gets out of the way" of his own tale, so to speak, appearing only insofar as others appear. This performance of humble character recapitulates the nature of the Pauline principle Thomas argues is central to John's preaching "with kindness and humility of spirit" in "imitation of Christ": "He [Christ] has chosen what is weak in the world to confound the strong. He has chosen what is abject and contemptible (*abiecta et contemptibilia*) to overturn the

²⁴⁷ Sweetman, "Christine of St. Trond's Preaching Apostolate," p. 68.

powers that be as if they had never been” (II.9).²⁴⁸ John’s particularity is systematically effaced as the text shows the dispersal and resurrection of its hero in his followers. Such an erasure is a form of humility. John is represented by those whom he converts, confesses, and leads, both the nobility and the masses, and though Thomas’s book is addressed to the canons at Cantimpré, its intended readership was likely much broader than that small community if its lessons on transubstantiation and against usury are any indication.²⁴⁹ At the very least, the *vita* would have provided the canons with *materia praedicabiles* for preaching to larger audiences on these pressing contemporary issues.

Both Christina and John are figured as representatives of the evangelical tradition: both preach penance to the community at large, live lives of poverty, and practice itinerancy, the primary setting of both tales being not the cloister, but the cities and rural haunts of the nobility. Furthermore, the language of wonder and horror, which I have shown to be essential to Christina’s mission, also appears in the *Life of John*. However, in general, the *VJC* focuses on John’s *speech*, which is described as having the marvelous and horrifying power Thomas will later attribute to Christina’s marvelous *body*. Like Christina flesh, John’s words have bodily effects, particularly horror, compunction, and identification. Thus when he preached against heretics in Cambrai, the people,

²⁴⁸ “Si enim Christus in debellacione seculi uti sua eterna potentia uoluisset, non utique homines sine literis et ydiotas, ut Lucas in eorum actibus testatur, sed milia milium, duodecies centena milia angelorum sibi in auxilium exhibita delegisset. Sed regnum eius non est hinc, quia ministrare uenerat et non ministrari, et infirma mundi elegit ut confunderet fortia et abiecta potius et contemptibilia, ut ea que errant, tamquam non essent euacuaret.”

²⁴⁹ One important later reader of the *VJC* was Jean Mauburne, a canon regular (1460-1501), correspondent with Erasmus, reader of Kempis’s “Imitation of Christ,” and important reformer of many houses of canons in France. He included the *vita* in his *Rosarum hortulus*. The presence of the *VJC* in this context shows the persistence of ideals of reform as articulated by the *vita*. See the introduction by R. Godding in “Une oeuvre inédite,” p. 248-250.

“thunderstruck by his urgency...were in such ecstasy that their hair stood on end.

Without delay this divine horror, transfused into their souls, brought a great many to eternal salvation through compunction” (*diuinis horror in animas transfusus*) (II.11).²⁵⁰

John’s prayers and tears for the disbelieving Walter of Flos enabled the nobleman to have a vision of the Christ child being elevated at the altar. Seeing “this wonder, the man fell prostrate in fear” (*horrore prosternitur*) (1.10). Again, when attacking usurers, Thomas says that “With such remarks he provoked the whole people to astonishing compunction” (*ad compunctionem mirabiliter prouocabat*) (II.13). The prince Robert Mauvoisin “marveled at John’s holiness and eloquence” after hearing John speak, and turned inward with “vehement self-reproach” (II.9).²⁵¹

The emphasis on John’s linguistic gifts does not, however, preclude the importance of bodily performance in the *VJC*, even as one cannot ignore Christina’s verbal abilities. John’s preaching sometimes employs physical spectacle, though in this case, it is the penitent who becomes spectacle, usually through John’s skillful handling, rather than John himself. These spectacles are described by Thomas as persuasive techniques that move the audience to imitate the renunciation of the performing penitent, and are offered as proof of the power of John’s preaching to the reader of his *vita*. Such displays include John’s “shrewd” encouragement of the priest Alard’s ritual suicide and resurrection to signify his death to usurious and fraudulent behavior (II.13), a dramatic

²⁵⁰ “Cuius stupore et extasi omnes in subitatione peruasi, pilis carnis quasi quibusdam hisutiis inhorruerunt. Nec mora, diuinus horror in animas transfusus, interius uirtutem eterne salutis per compunctionem operatur in pluribus.”

²⁵¹ “His dictis, uehementi in se animaduersione conuersus sanctitatem uiri et facetitiam mirabatur, cepitque eum intimo affectu cordis excolere eiusque uerbis et admonitionibus inherere.”

performance carried out before a “great crowd” who wept “abundantly” at the melodramatic display. Thomas offers a detailed description of rich penitents stripping themselves in response to John’s preaching, leading John to ask the crowd, “Who will clothe my children who have made themselves poor and naked for Christ’s sake?” In response, other nobles threw off their garments. Thomas describes such scenes vividly (implying such events happened more than once) writing, “You would see tunics and cloaks flying through the air from the violence of those who threw them, naked men clothed and overwhelmed, and the people shouting to heaven with a mighty voice,” and in their midst a weeping John, showing himself to have the gift of tears (II.12).²⁵²

Thomas’s depiction of John’s virtues draws heavily on the Cistercian tradition of feminine images for describing the authoritative male’s relation to God and his community.²⁵³ While John, as a man, is able to perform his preaching duties *ex officio*, unlike Christina’s improvised and scandalous activities, Thomas is careful to describe his authority by means of feminine metaphors, making his powerful presence and practice appropriate for someone who exemplifies the *vita apostolica* and its principle of inversion. Although the brilliance of John’s mind was noted, as was his education in business and scripture (I.3), like Lutgard (VLA I.3; III.17) he was said to have a dovelike

²⁵² “‘Quis filios meos paupers pro Christo effectos et nudos cooperiet?’ Ad hanc uocem, uideres nobiles et insignes uestibus se certatim exuere, tunicas et pallia iactantium uiolentia ferri per aera, uestiri ac cumulari nudos, altisonis uocibus populum conclamare.” As Barbara Newman notes, John’s *vita* bears astonishing similarities with Francis’s, and the *VJC* was completed the year of Francis’s canonization and the appearance of Thomas of Celano’s *vita prima* (B. Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saint’s Lives*, p. 6). This similarity has to do with the common urbanization, mercantile wealth, and the concomitant disparities between rich and poor that arose, leading to protest poverty movements inspired by the *vita apostolica* (Ibid., p. 11).

²⁵³ For a close analysis of this language and tradition, which she traces back to Anselm of Canterbury, see Caroline Walker Bynum, “Jesus As Mother, Abbott as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-century Cistercian Writing,” in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

simplicity (*columbina simplicitas*) (I.14), echoing the description of his mother as *columba simplex* (II.1), in keeping with the text's upholding of an apostolic ideal of simplicity. As in Thomas's accounts of Lutgard, Margaret, and Christina, John suffered to remain in the flesh, and the outward affliction of his *ascesis* was matched by the inward torment of his desire to be with Christ: "inwardly his ardent spirit was tormented (*torquebatur*) the more keenly (*anxius*) the more he longed (*cupiebat*) to be dissolved (*dissolui*) and be with Christ" (II.22). However, while this language of the desire to be dissolved often raises the problem of suicide in women's texts, as the choice is between life and death, the flesh and the spirit (see for instance the *VLA*, III.9), this language of torment is most elaborate in Thomas's description of the split between John's vocation as a community leader and as a contemplative:

He was urgently constrained on the one hand by concern for neighbours, among whom scandals were increasing, and on the other by the desire to see Christ...Suspended (*suspensus*) thus between hope and fear in an agony of spiritual martyrdom (*spiritalis martirii agone*) he found himself exalted on one side on the rack of expectation, burned on the other by the fires of scandal. In this way he afflicted (*afflictio*) his body outwardly and his spirit inwardly. Since the age of physical martyrdom is now over, there remained to him only spiritual affliction of the will (*uoluntatis spiritualis afflictio*) (II.22).²⁵⁴

The language of martyrdom that so permeates Christina's vocation is here entirely interiorized and made a function of the proper exercise of a canonical office. The rack on which Christina was stretched becomes for John the expectation of his community; while

²⁵⁴ "Sed ab una parte sollicitudine proximorum in quibus scandala crebrescebant, ex altera uero desiderio uidendi eum quem memoriter retinebat, instantiusangebatur. Inter hec duo, spe quodammodo metuque suspensus, spiritualis martirii agone, ut hinc expectationis eculeo sublimatus, illinc scandalorum ignibus ureretur. Sic corpus foris, sic spiritum affligebat interius. Corporalis martirii iam tempus abierat, restabat solius uoluntatis spiritualis afflictio."

Christina creeps into fire, John suffers the scandals of his community. Like William of St. Thierry and Bernard of Clairvaux, John is an abbot with an ambivalent relationship to his own leadership as it removes him from constant contemplation. The office of abbot and priest is represented not as a source of unmitigated power but as a site of continual *askesis*, one that John was able to eventually renounce (II.24). Furthermore, like the Cistercians studied by Bynum, the feminine became a vital supplement to the exercise of a powerful office, as Thomas writes that John behaved to those in his charge not as a king or Lord, but as a “father” and “more than a mother, and like a hen who clucks to summon her chicks” (II.24).²⁵⁵

Like all saints who tended in thirteenth-century hagiography to possess a “glorious body,” one that expresses the *virtus* of the soul, John’s body was remarkable.²⁵⁶ Unlike Christina’s, however, which bore witness to the deformity of the human condition even as her soul was perfect, John’s body revealed his soul, for a “kind of apostolic dignity shone out in him” and a “certain angelic majesty in his eyes displayed the grace of wonder-working virtue” (II.9).²⁵⁷ Gazing on his face would cause his audience to be stricken with compunction as soon as he ascended the pulpit, before he had uttered a word.

²⁵⁵ Bynum, “Jesus as Mother,” p. 115. She notes that Bernard, in particular, uses the image of the Abbot as a suckling mother who pours out affectivity and instruction, unable to turn away from her child whatever happens. The abbot is not only bride but mother, one who must do more than lie with the groom, but must busily raise her needy children, i.e. preach, counsel, and perform administration.

²⁵⁶ André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 437-438.

²⁵⁷ “Erga uero plebeias multitudines, adeo sanctus et extra humanum modum mirabilis apparebat, ut apostolica quedam in eo dignitas reflorescere uideretur. Predicaturus enim in populo statim, ubi ascenso pulpito seu exedra primam in themtate sermonis uocem dabat, omnes pene in lachrimis resoluti compungebantur.”

The beauty and persuasive power of the saintly face is a *topos* that gained ascendancy in the thirteenth century among both male and female saints. This hagiographical commonplace was articulated in systematic form by Aquinas, who held that the illumination of the soul was reflected in the body; insofar as the saints exist in union with Christ, who is light, their bodies are irradiated, reflecting the divine light.²⁵⁸ While both John and Christina's bodies inspired compunction, the former did so through its harmonious beauty, the latter by means of the shock of its abjection. John's body, soul, and speech existed in a harmonious union while the horror of Christina arose through the asymmetry of her soul and body. The abjection and humility that are hallmarks of the *vita apostolica* were attributed in the *VJC* to John's words, not his body. The power of his speech, particularly with nobles whom he handled especially gently, was said by Thomas to be a function of its humility and moderation, a manifestation of the "abject and contemptible" (*abjecta et contemptabilia*) power of the heavenly kingdom (II.9). Thus, the principle of abjection and humiliation we find in the poverty and suffering of Christina's body was here attributed to John's preaching.

Body and speech thus have an inverse relation in the two *vitae*. While in the *VJC* John's body was present, it served to confirm his word, which was the primary means of his mission. In the *VCM*, Christina preached by her words, but her most dramatic and memorable testimony was that of her strange flesh, which occupies a much greater portion of her *vita* than her verbal witness. The imitation of Christ performed by both saints followed the tradition of the *vita apostolica*, but the hyperbolic nature of Christina's bodily imitation of Christ rendered her inimitable and deformed, an eruptive

²⁵⁸ André Vauchez, *Sainthood*, p. 435. See Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, IV.86.

force that insisted on its singularity, while John's body was beautiful and his words, manifesting the abjection and humility of Christina's flesh, were gentle, simple, and persuasive.

Conclusion

Thomas's portrayal of Christina is an example of the use of women as powerful signs and proof of orthodoxy, particularly the doctrine of purgatory and the importance of penitential suffering for sin. In order for women like Christina to be effective agents of persuasion and teaching, it was necessary that they have access to an authority that would make their message compelling despite their exclusion from traditional sources of authority, particularly priestly office. The work of Bynum and others has shown how women's bodies in the thirteenth century were enlisted as the site and source of spiritual authority, as they identified their flesh with that of Jesus in his suffering humanity. Through this identification, they obtained a power and influence otherwise inaccessible to them.²⁵⁹ As I have shown, Thomas follows this trend in his portrayal of Christina. As we have seen, Christina's body is foregrounded in a way that John's is not, and has radically different qualities. However, it is not Christina's body itself that is persuasive, but its astonishing qualities and its wondrous effects. These effects, I have shown, are exemplary in two opposed but related ways: first, the horror her monstrosity inspires acts

²⁵⁹ See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: On the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). In *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, André Vauchez, p. 438 argues that women had only the "language of the body" at their disposal for the expression of their religious experience, and in the later Middle Ages this discourse was increasingly inflected by the suffering body of Christ.

as a mirror, its seeming difference revealing a terrifying similarity between her body and the bodies of her spectators. The horror of her body compels belief in purgatorial punishments and the reality of sin. Second, her flesh, in its excessive, again monstrous, suffering, is the locus of her *imitatio Christi*, and thus becomes a place to apprehend the divine, but in its ineffability. In order to embody this ineffability, Christina's flesh not only acts as a mirror but also remains other by virtue of its scandalous particularity. That Christina's *imitatio* points to divine ineffability thus reveals a limitation to exemplarity, a way in which the mimetic chain by which Christian sanctity is conceived and communicated breaks down.

The *Life* further emphasizes this tension inherent to the structure of sanctity by showing Christina's *imitatio* as an encroachment upon the dogmatically declared singularity of Christ. While Christ died once, Christina died three times; he was resurrected once, she twice. She suffered supernatural pain for a much greater length of time. Her imitation was based not only on Christ's human life, but also on his supernatural ability to become sin and to be resurrected. Insofar as her monstrous flesh reveals the incommensurability of the divine and human realms, becoming a deformed and singular spectacle of divine presence, it points to divine distance or dissimilarity. It is an apophatic strategy. Insofar as her body is recognized as a mirror of the human condition and a warning of future things, it points to the pedagogy of the incarnation, of a God who, in Origen's phrase, becomes all things in order to transform them.

The doubleness of Christina's sanctity can, in part, be attributed to Thomas's theological views articulated in the contemporary document, *De Natura Rerum (DNR)*. The text lays out a pastoral dualism by virtue of which the saints are held to be humans

who live *contra naturam*, their virtue the result of the ordering of their lives to grace. The *DNR* holds monks, nuns, and other religious persons to this ideal, while the virtuousness of the laity is understood to arise from an alignment with nature.²⁶⁰ In the *DNR*, preaching to the laity thus involves a focus on the recognition of sin and penance, rather than the modeling of the cultivation of virtue and purgations of *ascesis*, as the recognition and removal of sinfulness is understood to enable the natural virtue of the soul and body to arise. By virtue of her resurrection, Christina enacts, though in a fashion more literal than other saints, the way in which saints are *contra naturam*. The astonishing, unbelievable quality of Christina's post-resurrection existence depicts the invasion of the order of nature by the order of grace and narrativizes the incommensurability of the two spheres. However, in making his exemplar of supernatural virtue a *laywoman*, and addressing the text to a general audience ("whoever reads these things"), Thomas complicates the dualism that Robert Sweetman has identified as essential to this phase of Thomas's career.

Christina's construction as one-who-must-be-admired is not only an apophatic strategy but also a pragmatic political tactic. While Christina's astonishing nature obtained for her an authority disallowed by her gender, the same gesture that bestowed this authority built a fence around the female saint, making her safe by delimiting the sphere of her influence, placing a boundary around her exemplarity. This boundary, I have shown, is not present in Thomas's *Life of John*, which narrates a figure who is radically imitable, such that he dissolves into the persons whom he converts and influences. The radical singularity of Christina's outrageous wondrousness acts as a kind

²⁶⁰ Robert Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching*, p. 135.

of cloister for the itinerant saint, as Thomas attempts to delimit the frontiers of her influence.

However, the distinction between Christina's imitability and her admirable wondrousness ultimately leaves the reader with the difficult task of interpretation: How to determine what to imitate and what to admire? What is shared and what remains other? As both elements inhere in her body, such discernment is particularly difficult. The binary of imitation and admiration, the similar and dissimilar, contains the constant potential of its own collapse and can be mediated only by the reader's interpretive act. In giving Christina's divinely directed deeds demonic lineaments, Thomas shows the ambivalence of the appearance of sanctity, particularly in women, and the fraught nature of the interpretive endeavors this appearing requires. Furthermore, Christina's marvelous imitation shows the impossibility of the audience's own imitation and interpretation. The *Life of Christina* turns to monstrous figuration and the singularity of its wondrous saint in order to offer an apophatic logic, to show how "impossible it is to bring divine life into plenary presence."²⁶¹ Christina's monstrosity evades ultimate signification, its otherness causing a crisis of response and multiple interpretations that may frame Christina's strangeness, but never exhaust it.

²⁶¹ Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, p. 13.

Chapter Three

A Question of Proof: Augustine and the Reading of Hagiography

Introduction: Example, Relic and Text

In the *Supplement to the Life of Marie of Oignies* (VMO-S) (1230), Thomas of Cantimpré writes that James of Vitry realized from long experience that a mind overwhelmed by the temptation of blasphemy does not easily grasp (*capiat*) an argument (*rationem*) from scripture “unless it is buttressed with the most telling examples” (*nisi exemplis evidentissimis confirmetur*).²⁶² James’ description figures example as a kind of proof, for it provides the evidence that is able to render an elusive argument not only visible, but that establishes its veracity and thereby makes it compelling for an audience. Example, according to James, is central to the work of religious persuasion. The context in which Thomas invokes James is a story that relates a crisis of faith suffered by Hugolino, then bishop of Ostia, later Pope Gregory IX, providing in its course a vivid instance of the importance of example for a man for whom traditional sources of persuasion—particularly the scriptures—were no longer effective in the face of demonic persuasion. Thomas describes the reception of James of Vitry’s *vita* of Marie of Oignies by Hugolino, enabling us to see more clearly how, in 1230, Thomas understood the persuasive power of example to function.

²⁶² Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis, Supplementum*, in AASS, 23 June, XXV, 572-81. English translation in *Mary of Oignies, Mother of Salvation*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, trans. by Hugh Feiss OSB (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), ch. 16. Hereafter VMO-S. Passages will be cited within the text. “Sed quoniam ipse Acconensis, vir prudens & expertus, in talibus fieri sæpe sciebat, ut mens talium maxime tentationum fluctibus obruta, subito rationem non capiat, nisi exemplis evidentissimis confirmetur.”

According to Thomas, when Hugolino confessed to James that he suffered from the temptation of blasphemy, James first proclaimed “things that seemed to be apt and suitable for temptations of this kind,” but his “reasoning” (*rationem*)—those “ungrasped” arguments James refers to in Thomas’s quotation—remained ineffective, as did James’s wise pastoral strategy of “mingling his sighs” with Hugolino’s.²⁶³ James finally gave him Marie’s *vita*, confident that this saint who so often cured others of the spirit of blasphemy would soon cure the bishop.²⁶⁴ The book, James told Hugolino, contained “many examples” of Marie’s “special grace” of expelling blasphemous spirits, a gift, James insisted, she retained in death. Hugolino then asked James if he could also borrow the relic of Marie’s finger that James wore always around his neck and which, as Thomas describes in chapter twenty, helped to save James’s life during a shipwreck. Hugolino took the book along with the relic and “devoted himself” to reading her *Life* (*lectioni vigilanter incubuit*). He found “wondrous hope and peace” in the *vita*, and from the relic, he derived a “great mental confidence.” The transformation wrought in Hugolino by James’s gifts culminated in a secret vision in which, “with the palate of his heart he tasted how sweet is the Lord” (*gustansque palato cordis quam suavis est Dominus*), and attained a lasting security (*securitas*), free from his old temptations.²⁶⁵

Thomas portrays James’s intervention by means of example and relic as being remarkably efficacious, having an almost instantaneous, irresistible effect. However, by the time he wrote *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières* (*VLA*) thirty-two years later (1262),

²⁶³ “ingressus Scripturarum misericordiaeque divinae thesauros, praedicabat (sed non ignaro talium) ea quae in hujusmodi tentationibus apta & congrua esse videbantur.” *VMO-S*, ch. 16.

²⁶⁴ *VMO-S*, ch. 16.

²⁶⁵ *VMO-S*, ch. 17.

Thomas's confidence in the power of hagiographical example to persuade, increase understanding, and thereby transform readers was greatly mitigated. The Prologue to the *VLA* foregrounds his concern that the *vita* would not be believed and thus would not be adopted by readers as an exemplary text, concerns elaborated as part of an extended humility *topos*. Hugolino's idiosyncratic, blasphemous doubt becomes, in the Prologue to the *VLA*, the doubt of all readers in the truth of Thomas's tale. In contrast to Hugolino's experience with Marie's *vita*, the *Life of Lutgard* is not represented as irresistible, nor does the text portray itself as conferring an immediacy of saintly presence on the reader. Instead, the Prologue emphasizes the rhetorical situation of writer and resistant reader—the reader who considers the merits of an argument, weighing the legitimacy of offered proofs—positing the necessity of the participation of the reader's reason in the work of belief and interpretation. The reader must, in Thomas's language, “take up” (*suscipiant*) the tale and the saint, without which taking up, the exemplarity of its saintly figure would remain ineffective. The exemplar is adopted as such only after a process of deliberation. The contrast in attitude towards hagiographical example between the *Supplement* and the *Life of Lutgard* can be seen in Thomas's recapitulation of the trope of finger and text in the later *vita*: Thomas wrote the *Life of Lutgard* in exchange for Lutgard's finger. While Thomas needed to *earn* a finger by writing a *Life* that was a performance, incitement, and proof of his love and belief, Hugolino graciously received Marie's finger, and was thus given the capacity to believe.

The question of exemplary proof and the ways in which it solicits readers' belief in thirteenth-century hagiography is an important one, for it was a time when Catholic and Cathar alike proffered novel and contemporary forms of sanctity as models for pious

practice and as evidence for the truth of theological claims. Hagiographies like Thomas's, Dyan Elliott argues, were key documents for "proving" the sanctity of women whose piety was sculpted in order to refute Cathar claims.²⁶⁶ Such *vitae* were the initial stage in a juridical process that culminated in an orderly *inquisitio* undertaken by the papacy that determined the validity or spuriousness of a claim to sanctity. Elliott thus identifies a double dynamic of proof: holy women were proven saintly by hagiographical evidence; these women, in turn, became proofs of orthodoxy, living instances of the truth of Catholic dogma. According to Elliott, both Thomas's and James of Vitry's *vitae* are exemplary illustrations of this kind of hagiographical writing.²⁶⁷ The saints of these *Lives*, she argues, with their elaborate somatic and Eucharistic piety, submission to clerical authority and its sacramental and penitential program, acted either as a kind of argument refuting the claims of heretics (including the denial of the goodness of the body, the materiality of the sacraments, the humanity of Christ, and the validity and efficacy of the Catholic priesthood), or as consummate performers of those saintly behaviors idealized by Catholics and Cathars, thus affirming the presence of apostolic values such as poverty and charity within a Catholic context derided as corrupt and greedy by many dissenters.²⁶⁸ The hagiographical representation of contemporary holy women thus affirms Catholic sacramentalism, their examples functioning as compelling rhetorical

²⁶⁶ Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 2.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

devices, rendering the saints vivid, comprehensible instances of abstract doctrine so effectively that they become forms of living proof.

The probative, juridical function of these *Lives* as noted by Elliott is indeed well established. The *vitae* are pervaded by the vocabulary of proving and witnessing that accord with the context of inquisition and trial to which both potential saints and heretics were subject. The verb *probare*, exceedingly common in ecclesiastical Latin and Thomas's *vitae*, translates variously as "to test, to judge, to inspect," referring to acts of adjudication and meaning to "make credible, to represent, to prove, or to demonstrate," referring to forensic acts of defense and representation within a legal context.²⁶⁹ However, Thomas's understanding of the nature of hagiographical proof and the way in which credibility, representation, and saintly example work within his *vitae* is more complex than the juridical model discussed by Elliott, and, as I have briefly noted, changes in the course of his career. Questions about how the saintly female example works as a persuasive device to solicit readers' belief, and how the texts themselves understand the rhetorical power of example, thus remain. In this chapter, I will seek to address these questions by examining the ways in which Thomas understands the function and capacity of saintly example to convince readers of the truth and theological probity of his hagiographical texts and the sanctity of their protagonists in *The Supplement to the Life of Marie of Oignies* and the *Life of Lutgard of Aywieres*, texts separated by a span of more than thirty years.

According to Aristotle, rhetorical arguments persuade hearers by producing belief (*pistis*) following the hearer's deliberation and subsequent choosing between alternative

²⁶⁹ Charlton T. Lewis, *A Latin Dictionary*, "probo" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 1449.

arguments.²⁷⁰ Example serves these arguments as “a kind of epilogue,” providing “evidence” of the truth.²⁷¹ However, for Thomas—working within an Augustinian lineage—the reader of scripture has the complication of being subject to the fall, to temptations that interrupt the capacity of truth to work upon the mind and, once persuaded, for that reader to act on that which has been decided. The deliberation and choice that Aristotle understands to mark the rhetorical situation are, for those working within an Augustinian tradition, fundamentally complicated and undermined by the fall. Augustine had effected a revolution in rhetorical theory with his doctrine of the fallen will: what is it to convince human beings who do not do the good they know or, even more fundamentally, cannot understand or believe the truth because of the because of demonic influence? The interdependence of intellect, will, and body, between knowledge, desire, and action, led Augustine to yoke the affective and intellective elements of

²⁷⁰ Wendy Olmstead, *Rhetoric: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 13. See Also Hannah Arendt’s discussion in *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 89-102. Thomas’s access to Aristotle’s *Rhetorica* is uncertain. Hermannus Allemanus translated a gloss on the *Rhetoric* from Arabic in 1240. The oldest translation of the *Rhetoric* from Greek was completed before 1250 but was, James J. Murphy notes, never used in the Schools and survives in only three manuscripts. William of Moerbeke’s translation, commissioned by Thomas Aquinas and completed ca. 1270 was obviously too late to have been used by Thomas of Cantimpré. James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 91-94. The point of mentioning Aristotle here, however, is not to make a case for what of Aristotelian rhetorical theory Thomas may or may not have had access to, but simply to contrast Augustine’s rhetorical theory with Aristotle’s.

²⁷¹ Aristotle, *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, trans. and introduction by John Henry Freese (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926 [1947], 2.20.1394a (p. 279). If, on the other hand, there is no syllogism to draw upon, Aristotle argues that a rhetor must employ many examples as demonstrative proofs, for conviction is produced by these; but if we have them, examples must be used as evidence and as a kind of epilogue to the enthymemes” (*Rh.* 2.20.1394a). James’s extensive list of the holy women of Liège in the Prologue to the *Life of Marie of Oignies* is an instance of this second use of example. The multiplicity of figures described leads the reader to conclude that something important and strange is afoot in Liège. According to Aristotle, this type of argument is weaker than one in which example is used as an illustration of an abstract argument.

rhetoric in unprecedented ways, for if persuasion is to be truly effective, he believed that it must engage the whole person, making the listener or reader not only able to understand the good, but to do it, despite the fallen will. Such action is possible only when the will desires to act in accord with that to which the intellect has acceded. Eloquence, for Augustine, arises from the combination of *logos* and *pathos*, for the audience must not only be made *certain* of the truth of an argument, but they must *desire* to act upon what they have heard.²⁷² Augustine perhaps best represents the holism of this view of persuasion in his description of transformational reading in Book 8 of the *Confessions*. Here, successful engagement with the biblical text is depicted as a physical act of “putting on” or being clothed in the body of the text. The converted reader not only understands intellectually but *incorporates* the Pauline command to live chastely.²⁷³

In Thomas’s story about Hugolino, we see the continuation of this Augustinian understanding. Temptation—the demon of blasphemy—negatively affected the capacity of Hugolino’s mind to “grasp” (*capiat*) an argument. The “grasping” of understanding Hugolino sought involved more than ratiocination leading to a choice. It was connected

²⁷² Wendy Olmstead, *Rhetoric*, p. 35. For example, Augustine writes, “in this grand style of eloquence which can be done to move (*ad commovendos*) the minds of listeners, the purpose being not to make known to them what they must do, but to make them do what they already know (*sciunt*) must be done.” *DDC* IV.75. Augustine is building upon Cicero’s argument that eloquence ideally instructs (*doceat*), delights (*delectet*), and moves (*flectat*) listeners (IV.74). Augustine quotes Cicero that to move the audience is a “matter of conquest” (*flectere victoriae*) and elaborates that a hearer is moved if “he values what you promise, fears what you threaten, hates what you condemn, embraces what you commend, and rues the thing which you insist that he must regret” (IV.75).

²⁷³ Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII.29. See “The Word, His Body,” in *Seducing Augustine*, ed. Virginia Burrus, et al, which discusses Augustine’s “dissolution into texts” as “Augustine’s own body is overwritten by a Pauline *verse* about Jesus’ body” (p. 53). Here, however, the author argues that the literal presence of Jesus’s incarnate body recedes under the pressure of Augustine’s ambivalence about figuration. Augustine does not encounter a vision of Jesus, but reads a Pauline commandment to live chastely. What Augustine’s body “puts on,” in other words, is very different than Hugolino’s act of taking up Marie’s relic and *vita*.

with the will, the faculty that, in being tempted, arrests understanding and, once healed, enables a transformation not only of the intellect now acceding to belief, but the affect and the body, such that the newfound understanding is figured in the tale as tasting within the heart. The story intimately links belief and understanding, the will, the intellect, and the flesh, and example is means of their union and thus essential to successful persuasion.

Furthermore, the pairing of text and relic, of hagiographical example and saintly body, leads to a fundamental opacity in the story concerning what, precisely, was the agent and source of Hugolino's transformation. Was it the bishop's engagement with the text, or Marie's finger? What is the relationship between them? Although Hugolino assiduously read the *vita*, his final transformative vision occurred when, following a time of reading, he was again tempted by a particularly violent demon of blasphemy, and, leaving the *vita* aside, grasped Marie's relic, invoked her, and was *instantaneously* relieved of his burden. Although it could seem that the relic ultimately purged him of his doubt, the story carefully couples relic and text, given as they were by James to Hugolino in the same moment. While the relic is a fragment of a literal body, the *vita* is a narrative that carefully and in great detail depicts the bodily form and exemplary deeds of the saint, and this depiction is, furthermore, not read but "incubated" (*incubuit*), as a hen broods over her eggs, or the bride reclines in the inner chamber. This engagement gives rise to an understanding described with the gastronomic participle, *gustans*, in a heart that is made a mouth able to taste the "sweetness" of God, much as Augustine was able to enfold his body in the garment of Christ. Both hagiographical example and relic bear saintly *virtus*, confer an immediacy of presence, each enabling Hugolino to "invoke that saint just as if

she were present” (*praesentem*).²⁷⁴ In Thomas’s full account of hagiographical example in the *Supplement*, then, example does not only buttress an argument by means of figuring abstract ideas or dogma according to the lineaments of a particular person or life, making them vivid and comprehensible. Rather, the ekphrasis of textual example is a form of living bodily presence that, like a relic, exercises an irresistible force upon another body and its desires, and is assimilated to the understanding by means of a reading conceived in highly somatic terms. Thomas’s tale of the power of saintly example thus no longer conveys an understanding of rhetoric simply conceived, nor of proof as a function of rational evidentiary corroboration of an argument.

The *VLA* continues the Augustinian holism of the *VMO-S* with a notable difference. By depicting Hugolino’s broken will and mind as healed by a hagiographical example that exercised an inevitable transformation, Thomas obscures the deliberative function of rhetoric in which the reader considers arguments presented and chooses between them, and thus downplays the role of a reader’s skepticism when engaging with hagiography. Rather than be delivered through the mediations of interpretive exercise, Marie’s exemplarity is represented as irresistible—we could say coercive—and immediate, Hugolino becoming primarily a site for the working of divine power. In contrast, the *VLA* does not present the same optimism about the efficacy of example and

²⁷⁴ The language of presence recalls Peter Brown’s argument in *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), that from its inception, the relic cult “gloried in particularity,” making the sacred present on earth in physical form, thereby bringing “a sense of deliverance and pardon into the present” (92). Enshrined relics offered holy presence in tangible form in specific locations, marking and differentiating geographical loci (86), while those who possessed relics—a form of portable presence—could share them and thus their gracious power with others. Brown argues that such “gestures of concord” solidified networks of sociality and patronage (90), as occurs in Thomas’s high medieval story between James and Hugolino, who enjoyed an extensive alliance.

wrestles with the problem of the reader's doubt, "barring," as Stephen Justice writes, "the devices of faith" from the outset of the text.²⁷⁵

Thomas's concern about his text's credibility leads him to explicitly theorize the act of reading the *vita* of a wondrous saint in the *VLA*, providing a methodology for his readers' *lectio* and their deliberative engagement with the text. While the Augustinianism of the *VMO-S* was implicit, in the *VLA* Thomas directly appeals to and recontextualizes Augustinian rhetorical and hermeneutical theory as articulated in the *De Doctrina Christiana (DDC)*. Augustine's theory of hermeneutics and rhetoric as articulated in the *DDC* is the correct context for understanding the notion of hagiographical proof and the belief it solicits in the *VLA*. Thomas's use of Augustine's rhetorical treatise marks Thomas's hagiography as a self-conscious work of persuasion in the tradition of Christian reading and preaching. Through Augustine, Thomas develops a theological hermeneutic to deal with the dilemma of belief he outlines in the Prologue. This hermeneutic transforms both the figure of the witness-reader and the location of *auctoritas*, which rests less in the text as an independent object, and more in the practice and will of the reader who engages with it and is thereby transformed. Deliberation makes space for doubt and the reader. However, this emphasis on the reader's engagement does not mean that Thomas theorizes correct hagiographical reading as one in which the reader controls the text or performs deliberative action upon an object that remains external to the reader. As in Hugolino's story, engagement with hagiographical example involves more than assent conceived in purely intellectual terms; deliberation requires affective engagement with the text and has implications for the reader's body insofar as the exemplary life of

²⁷⁵ Steven Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in their Miracles?" *Representations* (103) Summer 2008, p. 15.

the saint makes claims upon a devotee's actions. Belief is a matter of practice. Thomas represents ideal reading in his last *vita* in some ways as an act vulnerability to a text, recapitulating Hugolino's readerly posture, but in the *VLA* this incorporation is depicted explicitly as giving rise to understanding and emerging from love rather than fear. As the *VLA* has it, the reader of hagiography is drawn into an intimate relationship with the saintly exemplar that ideally transforms him or her into its likeness, as the body of the communicant assimilates and is assimilated to the Eucharistic host. This assimilation moves through doubt and deliberation by means of love and faith in order to arrive at understanding.

The Augustinian language of love, faith, and incorporation does not erase the juridical discourse from the *vita*. I will show that Thomas draws upon two discourses and two hermeneutics to construct his theory of hagiographical reading and rhetoric in the *VLA*. First is the juridical or probative one in which his task as a writer is to convince readers of the truth of his text by offering proofs—visible and verified examples that solicit a reader's intellectual assent—of saintly character that satisfy the doubts and curiosity of readers. In the second discourse of reading and rhetoric, which Thomas develops by means of Augustine, belief in the saint is a function of the reader's love; the reader believes in order to understand, and belief and understanding entail the adoption of the saint as an *exemplum* for the reader's own life. Thomas thus joins the juridical hermeneutic of proving and convincing with a hermeneutic that emphasizes moving the heart and changing practice to accord with belief.²⁷⁶ As a result of this connection, the

²⁷⁶ Aristotle's notion of the rhetorical syllogism or enthymeme (from *enthumesthai*, meaning "to take heart," "to conclude," or "to infer") draws near to Augustinian formulations on this score in the sense that he understood a good rhetorical argument to be one that enters the *thumos*, the

semantic and conceptual field of “proof” in the *VLA* is much richer than that of evidence given in a courtroom by a writer conceived of as a lawyer, a saint conceived of as defendant, and readers conceived of as jurors.²⁷⁷ At stake in the expansion of the category of proof is not only an acknowledgement of the complexity of the concept of proof and the texture of discourses by which Thomas composes his texts, but a more robust notion of the ways in which Thomas understands exemplarity to function within his texts and the ways in which exemplarity is bound up with rhetoric.

In addition to his use of the *DDC*, Thomas theorizes the ideal reader’s *lectio* by means of the narrative presence within the *vita* of different sorts of readers whose reactions and interpretive work variously enact Augustine’s rhetorical theory. These readers perform the incredulity and credulity of the *vita*’s readers, enabling the tale to become explicitly a space of deliberation and a reflection on the nature of that deliberation. Most notably, Thomas himself is represented as a resistant reader who undergoes a moral purgation of incredulity, moving from doubt to belief and love, a love

heart. See Wendy Olmstead, *Rhetoric*, p. 13.

²⁷⁷ The rich conceptual field of the notion of “proof” was present very early in Christian monasticism. For example, Cassian writes that a monk fully imbued with the language and affect of the Psalmist from a practice of constant recitation is able to anticipate the Psalmist’s words, becoming, in effect, the author of the Psalm, so that “the meanings of the words are disclosed to us not by exegesis but by proof” (*documenta*). John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. by Boniface Ramsey (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), X.xi.5 p. 384. *Documentum* contains the sense not only of proof as in a specimen, but, as its derivation from *doceo* suggests, may mean an example that teaches by offering a pattern for imitation or warning. *Documentum* and *probatum/probo* share the sense of demonstrating or showing the truth of something, but *probatum* carries a greater connotation of judgment, not only in the juridical context, where it is the term for what has been offered as proof in a trial, but more generically, it tends to indicate that which has been tried, tested, often by the fires of experience, and is thus approved, esteemed, or recommended. Charlton T. Lewis, *A Latin Dictionary*, “documentum” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

that ultimately issues in the writing of his tale. The *vita* also portrays the good and bad “readers” who were Lutgard’s fellow nuns. Finally, Lutgard is made a figure of the ideal reader of scripture, a subject that I will examine in detail in the next chapter.

Audience and Proof

Thomas’s employment of two discourses of proof in the *Life of Lutgard* was in part driven by considerations of audience. The reception of the *Supplement* would have raised radically different issues than the *VLA*. First, as supplementary to the *VMO*, the *vita* garnered the authority of the primary text, written by an established preacher—now cardinal with powerful papal connections. Furthermore, Marie’s reputation was already well established. The *VLA*, in contrast, though commissioned by Lutgard’s community and addressed to them and the nuns of Brabant, entailed multiple audiences. The nuns of Aywières likely sought both a memorial of their sister and an exemplary text for private use. They would, moreover, have likely been seeking to develop a cult around Lutgard in order to garner prestige and perhaps financial reward from pilgrims and devotees. The hagiography would then potentially become an integral part of a dossier on Lutgard’s bid for sanctity, which is in part why Thomas attends to the power of her relics in the final chapters of the *vita*, as this would be essential material for any *inquisitio*.²⁷⁸

For Thomas, the issue with regard to the audience of Lutgard’s fellow nuns is not only whether or not she is believable in and of herself, but whether the life that she

²⁷⁸ On this role for hagiography, see James Howard-Johnston, ed., *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 7; Barbara Newman’s Introduction in *Thomas of Cantimpré, The Collected Saints’ Lives*, p. 18.

represents is possible for those who read her *vita*. In other words, the question posed by the *VLA* is whether readers can believe that Lutgard could be a model for their own life. Can the virtue she represents be taken up as exemplary, and thus performed in the reader's own life?²⁷⁹

Another audience implied in the Prologue's concern for doubting readers—inevitable should the *vita* have been part of a canonization dossier—were clerics, men of the ecclesiastical hierarchy who, it was noted in the Introduction, often read *vitae* of *mulieres religiosae* with skepticism and disgust.

A final potential audience was the laity. Although the *vita* was written in Latin, thus radically circumscribing its readability, all of Thomas's *vitae* are filled with *materia praedicabiles* to be used by preachers.²⁸⁰ As Robert Sweetman has shown, by the time he

²⁷⁹ A. Deboutte, *De Heilige Lutgard* (Tentoonstelling uitgave van de Gilde van Sint Lutgard, 1963), pp. 19-29. Ms 8609-20 of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in Brussels contains the Lives of Lutgard, Christina, Mary Magdalene, Elisabeth of Hungary, Alice the Leper, Ida of Nivelles, Margaret the Lamé, Elisabeth of Schönaue, the *de gloriosis sodalibus sanctae Ursulae* and excerpts from *Sermo de XII fructibus sacramenti* by Guyard van Laon. The ms was owned was La Cambre Abbey, a Cistercian monastery. A second ms (4450-70 from the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in Brussels) was commissioned in 1320 by Jan van Sint-Truiden, a Cistercian monk from Villers and confessor of women at Vrouwenpark te Rotselaer. It likewise contained the Lives of Christina and Lutgard, as well as those of Cistercian nuns Beatrice of Nazareth and Alice the Leper, anchorite Margaret the Lamé, and Franciscan tertiary, Elisabeth of Hungary. An ms from 1300 containing Thomas's Latin *Life* of Lutgard and a rhyming adaptation in Middle Dutch attributed to the Benedictine monk Willem van Affligem, was owned by his monastery at St. Truiden went to the Rooklooster Priory of Regular canons in 1368. This manuscript history shows that the Lives of the astonishing laywoman Christina, Cistercian nuns, and women of other vocations were read together, and had great interest for monks of multiple orders. The question of how a reader could understand a saint's life to be adoptable and adaptable to their own existence would perhaps be even more difficult for male monastic readers of the *vita*. While it seems that if we take Thomas at his word, the text was intended for nuns, the circulation of the *life* in male monastic houses is clearly attested to by the historical record.

²⁸⁰ Barbara Newman, "Introduction" in *Thomas of Cantimpré, The Collected Saints' Lives*, p. 18. The vernacular translation of Lutgard's *Life* into Middle Dutch verse less than thirty years later indicates that the *vita* did indeed have a much broader appeal. There are two rhyming versions in Middle Dutch. The first, attributed to Willem van Affligem, was meant to be sung by minstrels. It is quite free with Thomas's version. The second is attributed to a Franciscan named Geraert. See

composed the *Bonum Universale de Apibus* (1256-63), Thomas wrote with no trace of pastoral dualism; the devotional life of the laity was elaborated according to the ideals of regular life, and the regular life was described in terms of the secular life. Like the cloistered, secular people were taught to live according to the order of grace rather than nature.²⁸¹ This rapprochement between secular and regular life can be seen as early as the *Life of Christina the Astonishing* (1232) and the *Life of Margaret of Ypres* (1240-1243), in which laywomen lived exemplary lives *contra naturam*. Lutgard's *vita* circulated with Christina's as early as the second half of the thirteenth century, along with the lives of other female saints, such as Mary Magdalene, Margaret the Lame, and Beatrice of Nazareth. Furthermore, Lutgard's *Life* recapitulates a number of the events of Margaret's *vita* in the same language. For example, like Lutgard (*VLA* 1.12), Margaret "never relaxed the vigilance of her mind to commit any mortal sin" (*VMY* 1.1); like Lutgard (*VLA* 1.2), her "affectus" for a man is translated into love for a new spouse, Jesus, resulting in a divine gift to never feel temptation again (*VMY* 1.7); like Lutgard, she is called a "simple dove" (*VMY* 1.10; *VLA* 1.3; 3.7). Given his commitment to pastoral duties to the laity expressed in such elevated terms, it seems highly possible that Thomas intended the *VLA* to be used in sermons for the laity as an expression of his Dominican vocation.

Erwin Mantingh, *Een monnik met een rol: Willem van Affligem, het Kopenhaagse Leven van Lutgart en de fictie van een meerdaagse voorlezing* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2000); Simone Roisin, *L'Hagiographie Cistercienne*, pp. 52-3, n. 8.

²⁸¹ Robert Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching in the Southern Low Countries 1240-1260: Materia Praedicabiles in the Liber de Natura Rerum and Bonum Universale de Apibus of Thomas of Cantimpré* (University of Toronto, unpublished dissertation, 1988), pp. 245-6. Sweetman notes that this view was common in Dominican sources and explains the increasing assimilation of traditionally monastic practices by devout laity beginning in the thirteenth century.

Juridical rhetoric and hermeneutics would have been necessary to address those clerics adjudicating Lutgard's sanctity, as well as those skeptics seeking proof of the sanctity of a woman whose form of life was in many ways novel and thus deemed potentially dangerous or unacceptable. Lay listeners with heretical views would likewise require such proofs. However, the nuns to whom the text was addressed would have been seeking to use the *vita* as a devotional text, looking to Lutgard for inspiration and motivation in their spiritual life, attempting to have those unconverted aspects of their soul further transformed. Furthermore, as the laity was held to the same ideals as those in regular life, such a transformation of the soul and body by means of the exemplary figure of Lutgard would have been held out as an ideal for all those who came into contact with her *Life*.

The Crisis of Credulity in the Prologue to the *Life of Lutgard of Aywières*

The Prologue of the *Life of Lutgard of Aywières* introduces the question of belief as a dilemma that necessarily faces the writer of a wondrously virtuous life. The Prologue lays bare a set of anxieties, inviting the reader to reflect on the nature of the text and his or her relation to it. Thomas fears that his story will not be believed:

Not for many years, I believe (*credo*), has there been written (*descriptam*) the life of any person so filled with remarkable virtues (*virtutum insignia*) and so privileged by marvels and miracles (*mirabilium ac miraculorum praerogativas*). If you ask how I am to convince readers [to render my readers faithful to] (*fidem faciam*) of the truth of all these things, I briefly say (and may Christ himself be my witness and judge) that I received many of them from Lutgard's own mouth as one of her closest friends (*sicut familiarissimus*). In these matters no one, I believe, would be so bold as to contradict her testimonies (*testimoniis*). I acknowledge that I collected the rest from people of a kind who would never stray from the path of truth. There were many things—splendid ones in fact—which I have not consented to write, either because they would not make sense to

(*non intelligibilia*) the uncultivated (*rudibus*) or because I did not find suitable witnesses.²⁸²

Thomas thus opens the *vita* with a literary problem: the *Life* he has written (*descriptam*) is threatened from the outset by an irony necessarily arising from its subject. The same remarkable nature and miraculous deeds that compelled its writing strain the credibility of the narrative, undermining the reader's capacity to believe the text, its author, or its subject. Thomas must write of the incredible *mirabilia ac miracula* witnessed to in Lutgard's life even as he attempts to create a rhetorically persuasive narrative, one that is able to convince his audience (*fidem faciam*) of its truth, thereby fulfilling the hagiographical task of preserving Lutgard's memory as a bearer of divine gifts. The wondrous compromises the text's persuasiveness even as it is the condition of its existence. The power of the example to render an argument vivid and convincing by stirring the affections and giving rise to understanding is challenged by the miraculousness that both justifies the example's use and gives it its vividness.

These wonders and miracles not only compromise the *vita*'s credibility, but render Lutgard, by virtue of her special grace and ability to represent the seemingly impossible (and therefore wondrous) ideal of divine life, singular (or, as Thomas puts it, "set apart" [*sequestrata*], and thus worthy of being written about), but singular in an *exemplary* tale, meaning that that story offers Lutgard's singularity to others for their adoption. While the

²⁸² "Nec credo vitam alicujus, quae tot virtutum insignia & mirabilium ac miraculorum praeogativas in se contineat, a multis retroactis annis fuisse descriptam. Si autem quaeritis, quomodo legentibus fidem faciam de iis omnibus, quae conscripsi: breviter dico, quod ipse Christus testis & iudex sit, quod plurima ex iis ab ore ipsius pie Lutgardis, sicut familiarissimus ejus, accepi: & in iis nullum ita temerarium credo, qui ejus testimoniis contradicat: caetera vero a talibus me percepisse profiteor, qui nequaquam a veritatis tramite deviant. Pleraque etiam, & revera magnifica, scribere non consensi; vel quia non intelligibilia rudibus essent, vel quia testimonium conveniens non inveni." [Col. 0234C-D]

gap between the real and ideal, what is and what ought to be, between the saint who is set apart and the saint who is imitated, is always an issue in the reader's taking up of the exemplarity of the saint, the Prologue to the *VLA* explicitly addresses this gap, asking what happens to those who must dwell in this space and how they might successfully navigate it. The doubt that concerns Thomas is thus a concern about whether Lutgard's wondrous sanctity renders her singular in such a way that she is not believed to be exemplary on the part of readers.

Thomas *believes* that Lutgard's *Life* contains the greatest signs (*insignia*) of virtue and wonders seen for many years. In this opening passage his belief is set against the anticipated skepticism of his readers. By opening the passage with "credo" Thomas subtly introduces himself as the model believer and reader of the saint's *Life*. A model reader, he implies, is one who is *sicut familiarissimus* with Lutgard, brought near to hear her testimonies by virtue of an intimacy which, we will see, is both the enabling condition and result of such belief.

Lutgard's wondrous deeds and supremely virtuous character are problematic both because they defy belief in their own right, and because they are the site and source of Lutgard's novelty. While Thomas's statement that a saint such as she has not appeared "for many years" suggests that Lutgard is not absolutely without precedent, and, later in the *vita*, he calls her "another Agnes" and claims for her a merit equal to the virgin martyr by virtue of a hemorrhage in her chest (II.21),²⁸³ he asserts in the Prologue that no saint

²⁸³ "[S]he began in a wondrous and ineffable way to desire to endure martyrdom for Christ like the most blessed Agnes. As she burned with such great longing that she expected to die from desire alone, one of the outer veins opposite her heart burst, and so much blood flowed from it that her tunics and cowl were copiously drenched...and at once Christ appeared to her with a joyful countenance and said, "For the most fervent yearning for martyrdom that you experienced

of recent memory, and definitely no “living saint,” manifested holiness quite as she did. Thomas’s hagiographical efforts are therefore, he writes, similarly unprecedented, and despite his efforts to ground Lutgard’s claim to sanctity within the authority of tradition, it is her novelty that he desires to underscore, even as it creates the rhetorical difficulties here outlined. As much, then, as Thomas attempts to frame the holy women of whom he wrote in terms of the traditions of desert fathers and mothers, virgin martyrs, and other historical precedents, this *vita* cannot be read simply as a recapitulation of older hagiographical conventions. In particular, the *VLA* diverges fundamentally from earlier hagiographical models in its introduction of what Simone Roisin terms a “mystical element”—narratives detailing encounters with Christ, union with God, ecstatic states of prayer, and visionary experiences—alongside depictions of intense asceticism. According to Roisin, such portrayals of mystical union were “riskier” than detailing physical feats. She ascribes Goswin of Bossut’s ironically erudite humility *topos* in the *Life of Ida of Nivelles*—absent from his Lives of Arnulf, a *conversus* who practiced extreme bodily mortification, and Abundus, a monk of Villers—to the presence in Ida’s *vita* of “mystical facts” that occurred in the female saint’s interior life, “facts” absent from the two male Lives.²⁸⁴ The novel wonders and miracles of Lutgard’s *vita*, it becomes clear in the

in shedding this blood, you will receive in heaven the same reward that St Agnes earned when she was beheaded for her faith. By your desire you have equaled her martyrdom in blood.” (II.21) [“cœpitque miro & ineffabili modo desiderare, ut pro Christo, sicut Agnes beatissima, martyrium sustineret. Cumque tantum in tali desiderio æstualet, ut jam se mori præ desiderio crederet; rupta est ei vena contra situm cordis extrinsecus; & exinde tantum sanguinis fluxit, ut tunicae ejus & cuculla copiosissime rigarentur. Debilitata ergo resedit paululum: & statim apparuit ei Christus, in vultu congratulantis, & dixit: pro desiderantissimo fervore martyrii, quem in effusione istius sanguinis habuisti; idem martyrii meritum in cælo recipies, quod Agnes beatissima, pro fide mea in capitis abscissione suscepit: quia martyrium ejus tuo desiderio in sanguine compensasti”].

²⁸⁴ Simone Roisin, *L’Hagiographie Cistercienne*, p. 56. Goswin writes, “I have undertaken to write the Life of Christ’s virgin, Ida, undistinguished though I am by any oratorical fluency and

course of the *VLA*, are likewise its detailed depictions of Lutgard's intimate friendship, visionary encounters, and union with God. Parallels like this one lead Roisin to attribute Goswin's influence upon Thomas's writing of the *VLA*.²⁸⁵

Thomas's literary problem outlined in the prologue, then, is a result of the clash between his desire to witness to the unprecedented nature of the saint and the unintelligibility and skepticism this novelty yields.²⁸⁶ His constant references to the wondrousness of Lutgard's piety and to the fact that he is about to "speak marvels" (*mira dicturus sum*) (*VLA* I.12), contextualizes the *VLA* within Thomas's broader project, which aims to show that an unusual outpouring of divine grace is occurring in Liège, and is visible particularly, though not exclusively, among women.²⁸⁷ As with Christina

unaware of any imaginative subtlety adequately equipping me to couch it in fitting words. What largely excuses me is an order from my abbot, obliging me to set out the Life in a fairly simple style. In doing this, I have relied, not only my own limited imagination, but on that almighty Lord who *opens the dumb mouth and makes infant tongues fluent of speech* (Wisd. 10.21). Little wonder that my mind trembles to begin a task it can scarcely carry through, especially in that the admirable *conversatio* of this blessed one involves a saintly affectivity difficult to describe and those many kinds of luminous contemplations graciously lavished on her by her Bridegroom." The *topos* continues for three lengthy paragraphs. (*The Life of Ida of Nivelles*, trans. by Martinus Cawley O.C.S.O., in *Send Me God* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), Prol. b, c, p. 29).

²⁸⁵ Simone Roisin, *L'Hagiographie Cistercienne*, p. 222.

²⁸⁶ I am here breaking with Simone Roisin's account of the deep interest in the marvelous among Cistercian hagiographers in Liège. Roisin argues that they had a "naïve and perpetual amazement" that "spontaneously" arose in the face of their subjects (*L'Hagiographie Cistercienne*, p. 260). This view is odd given the rhetorical and literary sophistication Roisin finds in the *vitae*, and her argument that the language of the Lives is an attempt to reveal the inability of language to "catch a glimpse of the divine" (p. 212). Thomas's explicit concern about the credibility of this text, a concern that is repeated in the *Life of Christina the Astonishing*, demonstrates that the eruptions of marvelousness depicted by the *vitae* are not a result of Thomas's naiveté, but a saintly effect that he understands places him in a particular and often awkward position as hagiographer.

²⁸⁷ Thomas's sense of an apocalyptic shift occurring in Liège is apparent in his first hagiography, *The Life of Abbot John of Cantimpré*. He writes that John had arisen as "a new daystar amid the shadows of twilight," (*VJC* I.I) as "the present world draws near to its setting." In this work, the secular world is represented as filled with heresy, which John is sent to counter.

mirabilis, is not only the fact of Lutgard's piety but its unusual nature that is important to him and his rhetorical construction of their *vitae*. He notes in the Prologue and throughout the tale that what he tells are "still greater wonders follow[ing] upon...wonders" (*mirandis plus miranda succedunt*) (I.17), wonders both that she experienced (I.13; I.15; I.16) and that others witnessed working in her (I.19; II.2). These wonders are offered as proofs of Lutgard's sanctity even as they give rise to the skepticism that seeks such proof.

The doubleness of the marvel is apparent throughout the first book where, Thomas relates, Lutgard's devout way of life was unable to be imitated by her fellow nuns (*quam poterant non imitari*) who slandered her in their jealousy. Their disbelief lead to a series of publically manifested divine proofs, including Lutgard's suspension in the air before the whole community (I.10); her illumination by the sun in the night (I.11); her mouth being made to taste like honey long after she had a vision in which she sucked "much sweetness" from Christ's side wound—a savor that others tasted in her saliva, making them able to certify (*probaverunt*) the vision and its effects as true (I.13); the mystical placement of a golden crown on her head (I.17); her singing voice "marvelously stirred" those who heard it "to devotion" (*corda audientium ad devotionem interim mirabiliter movebantur*) (I.19). These external manifestations of Lutgard's divine favor eventually convinced the nuns of St. Catharine's of Lutgard's special status. They had not recognized, as Thomas puts it, the way in which she was "set apart" from them (*sequestrata*) (I.8) or "singularly honored" (*eam prae aliis singulariter honorare*) (I.17).

As Thomas tells it, these proofs ultimately led to her recognition and being elected as Prioress (I. 20).²⁸⁸

To elicit belief in the veracity of the wonders recounted by the *vita* is essential to Thomas's reputation as an effective author and to Lutgard's attainment of a reputation as the saint Thomas holds her to be. The skeptical reader is subtly reflected in those jealous nuns who read Lutgard's singular holiness as a demonstration of impious arrogance. This belief is also necessary if the *vita*'s primary audience, the nuns of Aywières and the Brabant, are to be able to adopt it as an exemplary instance of the virtuous life, one that could be used by them to further their own spiritual path. Thomas hopes, he writes, that

not only you [Hadewijch, the Abbess of Aywières], but the virgins of all the monasteries of Brabant should receive (*suscipiant*) this life of the gracious Lutgard so that she, whose reputation for virtue (*fama virtutis*) was known to all, should become even more widely known (*innotescat*) by the publication of this little book (*libelli*). May it increase virtue and merit in its readers, to whom it will provide a lesson (*praescriptum*) and example (*exemplum*) of virtue.²⁸⁹

The verb *suscipere* is the implicit synonym and supplement of *credere*. *Suscipere* means to take up, accept, and defend. However, as the origin of the English "suspicion," it refers to the Roman practice of the father "taking up" a new child from the ground after overcoming his suspicion that the infant may not be his own. The taking up thus occurs after a process of doubt and distrust. Thomas hopes the nuns will overcome their

²⁸⁸ The text explicitly models this suspicion early in the life when she escaped an attempted rape by one of her suitors, and yet "the innocent girl [became] an object of suspicion" (*in suspicionem innocens puella devenit*) among the townspeople who did not believe that she had fended off his attack (I.5).

²⁸⁹ "non solum vos, sed omnium monasteriorum Brabantiae coetus virginum, Vitam piae Lutgardis suscipiant; ut quae in fama virtutis notissima omnibus fuit, ipsa brevi libelli hujus insinuatione plenius innotescat; augeatque legentibus virtutem & meritum, quibus praescriptum aderit virtutis exemplum" (Pr).

suspicion of the *vita*'s excesses and "take it up." The verb implies that this taking up is not only a matter of overcoming doubt, but of an affective identification with, recognition of, and caring for, as if it were one's own, that which was regarded with suspicion. To believe is, then, to acknowledge the text as authoritative such that the claims it makes upon the reader are acknowledged as requiring a response, a "taking up" that is the necessary precondition for "increas[ing] virtue and merit" in the reader. Yet how is Thomas to persuade his readers to do this? The dilemma stands; the excessive wonders that are the content, justification, and often *proof* of the text undermine narrative credibility.

The Prologue first responds to the problem of disbelief with a turn to the terms of juridical discourse. Thomas emphasizes his dependence on reliable witnesses, those who knew Lutgard personally, including Thomas himself. He claims further that he left things out because he did not wish to court disbelief or the confusion of those too "rude" to understand the mysteries of his subject. He writes that the *vita* will contain examples of her virtues as well as miracles and marvels. The promise of providing signs of Lutgard's virtue accords with what André Vauchez has shown to be papal attempts in the thirteenth century to prioritize a saint's *virtus morum* over the more popular *virtus signorum*, or marvelous manifestations of divine favor in canonization policies.²⁹⁰ In his promise to also reveal many miracles and marvels, Thomas in effect plays to both audiences, the papal and the "popular."

²⁹⁰ André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. by Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 140.

In the Prologue's salutation Thomas appeal to the authority of his office, an authority he says transcends the interests and corruptions of his "personal name":

Instead of a proper name, I have put the author's office (*officium*) and his order in this salutation, so that the office and the order might commend (*commendetur*) the authority (*autoritas*) of the work, rather than making it worthless by the intrusion (*insinuatione*) of my personal name.²⁹¹

This is an argument from the authority of the office of the Order of Preachers, an authority held here to be free from the sully influence of the individual interests of a personal name. The *autoritas* of the Dominican order as a whole stands as a buttress for the truth claims made by the text. It is a mode of proof belonging to the juridical sphere.

However, Thomas immediately undermines this claim to the authority of the impersonal, writing that he, *personally*, was incited to write this text not only out of love for the monasteries of Brabant, but for that singular person, Lutgard:

Since it was not only your charity (*caritas*) which incited (*incitavit*) me, but also that of many monasteries, as well as the most burning love (*amor flagrantissimus*) I had for this most special personage (*specialissimum personam*) I have described in writing the life of the gracious (*pia*) Lutgard.²⁹²

The source for the *vita* was not the office and order of the author, but Thomas's "most burning love" (*amor flagrantissimus*) for the particular person, Lutgard. Thus, immediately following his appeal to the authority of the order and office, invoking the humility *topos* by means of the marked absence of the author's name, the text calls upon

²⁹¹ "Officium personae & Ordinis; & si non nomen proprium, in salutatione posui; ut scilicet autoritas in Officio & Ordine commendetur; nec tamen opus sequens nominis insinuatione vilescat" (Pr.). Interestingly, the contemporary *Life of Ida of Nivelles*, which Simone Roisin argues was a vital influence on Thomas, also contains an extensive humility *topos* in its prologue but did not, unlike Thomas, include the personal name, remaining anonymous (*L'Hagiographie Cistercienne*, p. 56).

²⁹² "Sicut me non solum vestra, immo multorum monasteriorum caritas & amor, quem specialissimum erga personam habebam flagrantissimus incitavit" (Pr.).

the authority of Thomas's personal claims. He has already implied that these claims do not assist with the narrative's credibility, and yet they appear forcefully with the use of the superlative to describe his love, and the marking of this love not as the generalized Christian *caritas*, but the more personally charged *amor*.²⁹³

Thomas's second strategy for answering the doubts of his readers is an appeal to the common hagiographical *topos* of the eyewitness. He writes that he has conveyed only those stories that he heard from Lutgard herself and those who are trusted friends. He claims that he left out things that, though wonderful and presumably painful to lose, were not adequately accounted for by witnesses. Furthermore, these human witnesses—Lutgard's friends, Thomas himself—are watched over by the looming authority of Christ, the witness who will judge what is written here, test its honesty, and hold the author and his sources accountable.

These two strategies of proof do not satisfy Thomas. In a drastic shift of tone and discourse, he moves from those proofs proper to a trial to an invocation of the rhetorical theology of Augustine. Quoting from *De Doctrina Christiana*, 4.11 he writes:

For as the most glorious Augustine says, 'it is a mark (*insignis*) of good and distinguished minds to love (*amare*) the truth in words and not the words themselves. For gold is no less precious for having been taken from

²⁹³ Though Augustine treated *caritas*, *amor*, and *dilectio* interchangeably, particularly in his homilies, early Christian writers generally did not use *amor* or *amare* because of its connotation of passionate physical love. *Amor* and *amare* do not appear in the Vulgate, and in other Latin translations when these terms were used, they never referred to "brotherly love" in "the religious sense." Thomas was an avid reader of Augustine, but his use of *amor* in this context would still have carried the force of its difference from the *caritas* he applies to his relation with Hadewijch and the monasteries of the Brabant. See John W. Rettig's commentary on Augustine's *Tractates on the Gospel of John 112-24*, trans. by John W. Rettig (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1995), pp. 115-6.

the earth; nor is wine less sweet for being extracted from worthless wood.²⁹⁴

The distinction between the truth in words and the words themselves relies on Augustine's categories of *signum* and *res*, signs (the words themselves) and things (those entities signified by the word), which he outlines in Book One of *De Doctrina Christiana*.

Thomas's invocation of this Augustinian distinction is, first of all, a creative use of the humility *topos*, a rather showy way of denigrating his writing while rescuing his subject. However, Thomas's appeal to Augustine's treatise is more than a rhetorical flourish. Instead, the hermeneutical and rhetorical theory of the *De Doctrina Christiana* (henceforth *DDC*), founded upon the fundamental distinction between things and signs and the proper relation between them, underlies Thomas's understanding of what it is to successfully read the signs of his hagiography, particularly the living sign of the saint.

Thomas's turn to Augustine is necessary because, no matter what kinds of evidence are provided, the Prologue indicates that the tension between intellectual certainty and the saint who is both manifest by means of miracles and practices as-yet unheard of is, in fact, irresolvable. The excesses of the miraculous cannot be domesticated, either by offices or eyewitnesses, and a reader who seeks to adopt the saint's *Life* as exemplary must exist in the gap between the credible and the incredible. This gap cannot be traversed simply by recourse to the use of a compelling example that would somehow give the reader intellectual certainty, for the example of Lutgard's life,

²⁹⁴ "Bonorum enim ingeniorum, ut dicit gloriosissimus Augustinus, insignis est indoles, in verbis verum amare, non verba. Neque enim aurum minus pretiosum est, quod de terra tollitur; neque vinum minus sapidum, quod de vilibus lignis excipitur" (Pr.).

with its miracles and marvels, necessarily exceed comprehension and the dynamics of juridical proof (even as they *are* Thomas's proof of Lutgard's holiness). However, while the Prologue registers this impasse as an anxiety, the hagiography exploits this tension throughout its telling by refiguring it in terms of a particular—what I have identified as Augustinian—mode of reading and writing the saint's *Life*. In short, it is a way of reading defined by taking up a relation to the wondrous in belief enabled by and defined as love.

Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*

Written for all those “with the will and wit to learn” (Preface, 1), not merely preachers, the *DDC* was intended to be a systematic exposition of the principles of biblical interpretation required for understanding a complex and foreign canon.²⁹⁵ Augustine paints himself as a teacher of the alphabet who provides the skills to his students that enable them to read, interpret, and teach this canon (Preface, 18). The need for interpretation exists for the majority of the faithful who are not, as Abba Antony, divinely inspired (Preface, 8), or as Paul, caught up into the third heaven to there hear “words that cannot be expressed” (Preface, 11). Furthermore, even those interpreters who are divinely inspired rely on the conventional human language they learned as children. Thus, even those who are divinely inspired require human teachers and the mediation of human language for the apprehension of the divine message. To argue otherwise and disavow the need for rules governing exegesis, Augustine argues, is to give in to pride and can lead to the view that one lacks any need for the mediation of the Church (Preface, 11), or of human love in which, when learning from one another, “souls overflow and as

²⁹⁵ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. and ed. by R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

it were intermingle with each other” (Preface, 13). The human condition, Augustine writes, “would be wretched indeed if God appeared unwilling to minister his word to human beings through human agency” (Preface, 13).

The participation of human agency in the creation of scripture necessitates human rules for its interpretation, for although—along with the entirety of the “temporal dispensation”—it was “set up by divine providence for our salvation” (I.85) and ultimately authored by God, scripture is subject to human distortion, including complications that come with translation (II.43), and divergences among manuscripts (II.41). The contingency of scripture means that ongoing interpretive effort is required in order to find, in and through its human media, the divine will. Rita Copeland argues that the emphasis on the necessity and centrality of the interpreter in Augustine’s theological rhetoric means that the role of the interpreter acquires a status unheard of in classical rhetoric, as “textual power” resides not in the author’s intention but the reader. Augustine moves “responsibility for making meaning from the writer to the reader.”²⁹⁶ Divine authorship is indeed ultimately responsible for scripture’s meaning—and entails the boundaries of that meaning—but as it is expressed in ambiguous ways, and is subject the limits of human language and historical vicissitudes, the reader must judge and determine what that meaning is with the assistance of doctrinal guidelines and exegetical rules.

²⁹⁶ Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 158. See also Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “The Fertile Word: Augustine’s Ascetics of Interpretation,” *Criticism* 28:3 (1986: Summer), p. 243; James J. Murphy who argues that the “metarhetoric” underlying Book Four of the *DDC* (as well as *De magistro* (389) and *De catechizandis rudibus* (399) places “great stress upon individual judgment” and holds that “rhetors do not persuade, but that hearers move themselves; that teachers do not teach, but instead that learners learn.” *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (University of California Press, 1974), p. 289.

The text immediately states that there are two things “on which all interpretation of scripture depends” (I.1). First, the discovery of what must be learned (*modus inveniendi*) (books 1-3), and second, the presentation of what has been found (the *modus proferendi*) (Book Four). The majority of the treatise, up to the end of Book Three, (3.78), was written in the mid-390s, perhaps before Augustine’s election as the bishop of Hippo, though after he had much experience as a preacher.²⁹⁷ The remainder of Book Three and all of Book Four were not taken up again for thirty years. Despite the significant temporal gap between the inception and completion of the treatise, however, R.P.H. Green notes that had Augustine himself not noted the break, it would have been undetectable,²⁹⁸ and David Tracy contends that the work constitutes an “authentic whole.”²⁹⁹ Moreover, the structure of the work is comparable to contemporary rhetorical compendia and treatises, treating style and presentation in a much more condensed fashion than invention, which comprises the greater part of most such works.³⁰⁰ While Thomas only quotes from Book Four a passage that he could have read within a *florilegium*, it is not unlikely that he had access to the entirety of the fourth book (if not the whole treatise), which was a central text for those learning and teaching the art of preaching,³⁰¹ and often circulated separately from the rest of the *DDC* for use as an *ars*

²⁹⁷ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, “Introduction,” pp. x-xi.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

²⁹⁹ David Tracy, “Charity, Obscurity, Clarity,” in *The Rhetoric of St. Augustine of Hippo: De Doctrina Christiana and the Search for a Distinctly Christian Rhetoric*, ed. Richard Leo Enos, et al. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), p. 272.

³⁰⁰ Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*, p. 155.

³⁰¹ Humbert of Romans, for example, quotes Book Four of the *DDC* multiple times in his *Treatise on Preaching*, ed. Walter M. Conlon, O.P. Trans. Dominican Students (Newman Press, 1951). An

praedicandi.³⁰² Most importantly for our purpose here, the theorization of *eloquentia* in Book Four to which Thomas refers in his Prologue depends upon and is consonant with the distinction between *res* and *signum* examined in the first three books of Augustine's treatise. I will thus briefly outline the background of the first three books of the *DDC* insofar as it elucidates Thomas's invocation of Book Four in his Prologue.

Book One of the *DDC* opens by naming the distinction between *res* and *signum*, thing and sign, a distinction that became central throughout the Middle Ages).³⁰³ Knowledge of both things and signs is necessary, Augustine argues, to understand scripture, for "all teaching is teaching of either things or signs." (I.4). A thing "in a strict sense" is that which is never a sign of anything else. A sign, in contrast, is a thing that refers to something else, a "thing which of itself makes some other thing come to mind (*in cogitationem*) besides the impression it makes to the senses" (*praeter speciem quam ingerit sensibus*) (II.1). Thus the substance "wood" is a thing, while the wood that Moses cast into the water to make it sweet is both a sign and a thing insofar as it signifies

earlier example of the popularity of Augustine's treatise for is Rabanus Maurus's ninth-century treatise, *De institutione clericorum* (important for Augustine's medieval influence), which summarizes the *DDC* and quotes extensively from Augustine's text. See James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, ch. 2.

³⁰² The first (known) printing of the *DDC* (Strasbourg, 1463) only published Book Four, which seems to be in keeping with the medieval tradition. See Sr. T. Sullivan, *S. Aurelii Augustini Hipponiensis Episcopi de Doctrina Christiana Liber Quartus: A Commentary, with a Revised Text, Introduction and Translation*, The Catholic University of America Patristic Series, 23 (Washington D.C., 1930), p. ix. Citation from Robert Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching in the Low Countries*, p. 147, n. 25. Demonstrating that his knowledge of the *DDC* extended beyond Book Four is the fact that Thomas appeals to Augustine in his earlier work, the *De Natura Rerum*, where he writes in the Prologue and Book 19 that his treatise answers Augustine's call in Book Two of *DDC* for the classification and description of plants, stones, and other natural things in scripture for exegetical purposes (*DNR* 19.7.8-12, p. 414. See Robert Sweetman, *Dominican Preaching in the Low Countries*, pp. 86-95).

³⁰³ R.A. Markus, "St. Augustine on Signs," in *Phronesis*, vol. 2 no. 1 (1957), p. 71.

something other than itself (I.4). While all signs are things, for all that exists is a thing, not every thing is a sign. Things, Augustine writes, “are learnt through signs” (I.4), and in relation to these signs, the *rei* are the content or subject matter to which the signs refer.

Augustine’s discussion of things immediately departs from a treatment of the *res* strictly in relation to scriptural interpretation to a consideration of the human relationship with all things. Book One primarily concerns the practice of ordering love such that all created things become signs that refer the soul to its divine, immaterial, eternal “homeland.” Augustine introduces the distinction between enjoyment (*frui*) and use (*uti*), to describe two possible modes of relating to things. Enjoyment refers to the type of relation a person should have to that which is the final end of the human soul, “eternal and unchangeable things” (I. 39). Use refers to proper action performed with regard to things that are not ends in themselves, but “are to be used so that we may attain the full enjoyment of those things” (I.39). Enjoyment entails “hold[ing] fast to [something] in love for its own sake” (I.8). Augustine then specifies that the *only* things that are to be enjoyed are the Father, Son, and Spirit—the Trinity—“a kind of single supreme thing” (*una quaedam summa res*) (I.10), while all other things are to be used in order to refer the individual to the supreme divine thing who is source and aim of the Christian life. If disordered desire leads the soul to enjoy that which should be used it is, in effect, turning sign to thing, interrupting its capacity to transport the traveler from the estranged land of materiality to the immaterial homeland, disabling the capacity of signs to reveal “the invisible attributes of God, which are understood through what has been made [Rom. 1:20] or, in other words, to ascertain what is eternal and spiritual from corporeal and temporal things” (I.9). For the person who loves in an ordered fashion, created things act

as “conveyances” rather than final resting places. Augustine describes this capacity of things “we use” to act as vehicles by virtue of their being “related” to the “aim of enjoying God’s goodness” (I.75), as the treatment of things in a “transferred” rather than a “literal” sense: “For when the object of love is present, it inevitably brings with it pleasure...If you go beyond this pleasure and relate it to your permanent goal, you are using it, and are said to enjoy it not in the literal sense (*proprie*) but in a transferred (*abusive*) sense” (I.80). The “use” rather than enjoyment of earthly things allows them to become catechretic, revealing that which is not “proper” to them, by “relating” the created to the creator and thus allowing those created things to become forces of transferral that convey the soul to its heavenly dwelling.

Augustine elaborates his discussion of *signa* in books two and three. He distinguishes between “natural” (*naturalia*) signs, which signify without intention—for example, the footprint of an animal signifies its passing (II.2)—and “given” (*data*) signs, which are, in contrast, those signs governed by human convention, which “living things” produce in order to “express and transmit to another’s mind what is in the mind of the person who gives the sign” (II.3). These include verbal and non-verbal signs, such as gestures or facial expressions that are “visible words” (II.4-5). Augustine distinguishes between two uses of given signs, “fitting” or “literal” (*propria*) signs—the use of a sign to signify the thing for which it was invented, as when the word “ox” (*bovem*) is used to signify the animal—and “transferred signs” (*translata*)—the figural use of signs whereby the signifying chain is extended in order that a sign may signify not only its literal referent, but some other thing, as when “we say *bovem* and not only interpret these two syllables to mean the animal normally referred to by that name but also understand, by

that animal, ‘worker in the gospel’” (II.32-34). Book Two addresses “unknown signs,” both fitting and transferred, while Book Three addresses ambiguous signs, both fitting and transferred, and provides interpretive strategies for exegeting these difficult signs.

Like Thomas’s Prologue, the *DDC* opens by addressing the problem of recognition. While Thomas faces the problem of the non-recognition of Lutgard’s sanctity, Augustine grapples with his diagnosis of the human condition as one beset by the problem of having an eye that, in the wake of the fall, is “weak and impure,” unable to perceive the creator through the creation. Christ’s incarnation and scripture were two solutions to this problem, each a form of divine speech. In the Incarnation, the divine *res* became *signum*, the end became the means, as immaterial divinity appeared to the “carnal eye” to compensate for the weakness of the “inner eye,” for, as Augustine quotes Paul, “the world was incapable of recognizing God through wisdom” (I Cor. 1:21) (I.25). Scripture, too, is a privileged means of healing the impure eye, a different kind of divine flesh. Although the divine *res* is ineffable, making of scripture a “conflict between words,” for it speaks the “unspeakable” God (I.13-14), the divine referent is nevertheless made available to the reader in its pages, which authoritatively witness to the revelation of God. Correct interpretation of scripture is purgative, an encounter with soteriologically placed signs that reforms and orders desire by “conform[ing it] to the truth” (I.37). For this encounter to be salutary, a reader requires the skills for approaching and correctly interpreting the various types of signs a reader finds in scripture, for it contains many obstacles, including the question of whether to interpret transferred and ambiguous signs in a literal or figurative manner. In order to be efficacious, the body of the sign must be

read in such a way that the reader sees “the truth in words” and “not the words themselves.”

Difficulties with signs occur not only at the level of interpretive dilemmas concerning obscure or ambiguous passages, but in relation to the eloquence of scripture. Book Four of the *DDC* addresses both the role of eloquence in the work of persuasion undertaken by the preacher who must instruct, delight, and move (persuade the listener to act upon that which she or he believes) an audience *and* the eloquence of the scriptures. Augustine asserts that he can conceive of nothing more eloquent or wise than scriptural writings. However, this eloquence is unique, for the authors of scripture “used our [pagan] eloquence side by side with a rather different eloquence of their own...” (IV.29). The singular quality of scriptural language arises from the fact that God has presented the mysteries of faith in simple language. Thus, unlike other literature, “the humbler (*humilior*) [scripture] seems the more thoroughly it transcends (*transcendit*) [the eloquence] of others” (IV.26).³⁰⁴ This form of eloquence, which Eric Auerbach argues gave rise to the “Christian sublime,” a style in which the great is revealed in the humblest of language,³⁰⁵ and the sublime becomes that which is most lowly, the most lowly the most sublime.³⁰⁶ To recognize scriptural eloquence as such requires that one first “understand these authors” (IV.25). “Indeed,” Augustine writes, “I venture to say that all who correctly understand what these writers are saying realize at the same time that it

³⁰⁴ “Ipsis enim congruit; alios autem quanto videtur humilior tanto altius non ventositate sed soliditate transcendit.”

³⁰⁵ Eric Auerbach, *Literary Latin and its public in Late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 22.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

would not have been right for them to express it in any other way” (IV.25). However, when he lacks understanding, “their eloquence is less clear” (IV.27).

Augustine’s acknowledgement that the recognition of scriptural eloquence occurs in the wake of understanding begs the question of how a reader might be convinced of and understand wisdom that does not seek to persuade by means of classically eloquent speech. Similarly, the question that arises from the first three books of the *DDC* is how a reader is to use the signs of the scripture in order to know and enjoy God, the true *res*, if that reader has no knowledge of God, no understanding that would make the signs intelligible, and in a postlapsarian state, confuses signs and things, enjoying, as if they were final ends (*rei*), what should be used as a means to that end (*signa*). For the converted reader, the renovation of the soul and its desires is necessary for reading scripture in such a way that its signs are understood to refer to God, and thus to function as vehicles for the return journey to the divine source. Even as the Christian ethos is one that uses and does not enjoy the finite things, so the interpreter’s transformed ethos is required that he or she might recognize that the referent of scripture is the rightly ordered love of God for God’s own sake and the neighbor for God’s sake (II.18-21). The “truth behind the signs” that is the subject of Thomas’s quotation is this love, and the interpreter who properly distinguishes between signs and things is able to see “the truth in words and not the words themselves,” to see love and not pay attention to the putatively awkward—ineloquent—surface of the *vita*, or to be caught forever within a net of ambiguity. As David Tracy notes, the initial distinction between the *res* and the *signum* liberates Augustine from his prior disdain for the “vulgarity” and “obscurity” of the scriptures in contrast to the clarity and sophistication of the pagan classics. It allows Augustine to

recognize the biblical writings as having their own kind of eloquence in service to their own topic, the love of God and neighbor.³⁰⁷

Thomas cites that portion of the *DDC* that argues the eloquence of a teacher must be simple. Augustine writes that

[i]n a word, the function of eloquence in teaching is not to make people like what was once offensive, or to make them do what they were loth to do, but to make clear what was hidden from them. If this is done in a disagreeable way, the benefits reach only a few enthusiasts, who are eager to know the things they need to learn no matter how dull and unattractive the teaching may be. Once they have attained it, they feed on the truth itself with great delight; it is the nature of good minds to love the truth in the form of words, not the words themselves [*in verbis verum amare, non verba*]. What use is golden key, if it cannot unlock what we want to be unlocked, and what is wrong with a wooden one, if it can, since our sole aim is to open closed doors?" (IV.72-73)³⁰⁸

The eloquence of the good teacher is subordinate to his wisdom, as words are subordinate to the reality (*res*) they represent. Delighting and moving an audience are secondary to the requirement to teach clearly. Eloquence should not be utterly dispensed with, lest the teaching lack all appeal, but unlike schoolmasters who regard eloquent figures as "something great...bought at a great price, and sold with great showmanship" (IV.45), Christian teachers should use a prose that divests itself of such ornament in order to teach

³⁰⁷ David Tracy, "Charity, Obscurity, Clarity" in *The Rhetoric of Saint Augustine of Hippo: De Doctrina Christiana and the Search for a Distinctly Christian Rhetoric*, ed. Richard Leo Enos, et al. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), p. 283.

³⁰⁸ "Prorsus haec est in docendo eloquentia, qua fit dicendo non ut libeat quod horrebat aut ut fiat quod pigebat sed ut appareat quod latebat. Quod tamen si fiat insuaviter, ad paucos quidem studioissimos suos pervenit fructus, qui ea quae discenda sunt, quamvis abiecte inculteque dicantur, scire desiderant. Quod cum adepti fuerint, ipsa delectabiliter veritate pascuntur, bonorum ingeniorum insignis est indoles in verbis verum amare, non verba. Quid enim prodest clavis aurea, si aperire quod volumus non potest, aut quid obest lignea, si hoc potest, quando nihil quaerimus nisi patere quod clausum est?"

the most serious of subjects. Rhetoric does not exist for its own sake; an instrument, it is to be used for the return of the soul to its source, rather than enjoyed.

When Thomas invokes this passage, however, he does so not in order to draw attention to the clarity of his writing. Rather, the passage is part of an extended humility *topos*. This rhetorical gesture does two things. First, Thomas draws a parallel between the *vita* and scripture, which has a similarly humble style (c.f. *DDC*, IV 26-27). Secondly, this paralls suggests a mode of reading the *vita*: as Augustine instructs readers of scripture, so Thomas asks readers to look not at his ostensibly poor prose, but at the truth behind it. He is asking them to take up the *vita* as an exercise practiced upon what we a text that can be read as “obscure” insofar as its subject resists understanding because of its incredible and novel claims. Thomas wants readers to look past the “wood” of his words, to see the “truth” that is Lutgard (and according to the logic of signs here, Lutgard as Christ), and not those mediating vehicles that compose the text.

Such a reading of his work would be a proper “use” of the text. Thus Thomas refigures Phillipians 4:8, which he renders “believe such things are holy as are useful [*utilia*].” The Pauline verse commands the community at Phillipi to “think about such things as are true, noble, right, pure, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy.” While Lutgard is represented as being all these things, Thomas tells readers to believe it insofar as it is “useful,” in other words, insofar as it allows them to look past the text and towards the figure of Lutgard who re-fers the reader to God. The reader of the *VLA* is like the interpreter of scripture in Augustine’s *DDC*. Through the use of the humility *topos*, Thomas thus makes enormous claims for the *vita*.

However, the obscurity that Thomas addresses by means of the humility *topos* remains a source of anxiety. The obscurity of his language arises, we have seen, from the novelty and unintelligibility of Lutgard's sanctity. The call to readers to read "beyond" language does not satisfy his concern. Why should a reader undertake such an exercise upon an unintelligible text and unauthoritative text? The *vita* is not, after all, the Bible (though it stands in complex relations of imitation to it). Thomas's task is to make Lutgard legible and thus acceptable and exemplary for a community of readers. At the same time, however, he must foreground the power of her wondrousness and novelty, for this strangeness energizes and justifies his text even as it threatens it. Without such legibility, the reader would remain unsure whether the life represented in the text is in fact a "possible" one, to use the happy phrase of Allison Frazier. By possible, I mean not only for Lutgard herself, or believable on the part of the reader, but desirable. How can such strangeness be placed in the space where a reader could "take it up"? What is required for a reading to be taken up such that it is efficacious, able to "increase merit and virtue" in its readers? How might reading itself be transformative?

Thomas's recognition that his hagiographical document is one that must persuade disbelieving readers—those who approach his subject not with faith and love, but a skepticism borne of what he claims is his poor prose and the incredible nature of its claims—mirrors Augustine's problem of recognition in the *DDC* that I have already discussed. As we have seen, to recognize the eloquence of scripture behind its humble style requires that the reader have understanding of the message of the text. Yet how is a reader to gain this understanding if the text seems inelegant, offensive, or simply unintelligible, its obscurities an opaque veil rather than a site for productive interpretive

exercise? How might Thomas convince readers of—render them faithful to (*fidem faciam*)—the truth of his text?

The solution offered by the *DDC* to the dilemma of understanding is that God must graciously give the capacity to discover him.³⁰⁹ Augustine's declared reliance on grace for inner transformation and understanding does not, however, end in quietism; rhetorical persuasion and teaching remain central tasks in Christian life. Truth requires, he asserts, persuasion to turn the soul towards its proper end, and clever language to defend it. Yet the dilemma remains acute in the treatise, as it is for Thomas and the readers of his *vita*, for in the realm of the fallen will, the unconverted soul suffers a fractured relation between sign and thing, and the good that would repair this relation is no longer irresistible. Real eloquence for him is that which stirs listeners to "lend their assent to matters which they admit to be true," and to "act decisively on the knowledge that they have" (4.15).³¹⁰ In other words, persuasion must engage the will and the body. Although a person may know and desire to do the good, it is impossible because humanity has been sold into sin. The divided will that resulted from the fall renders knowledge powerless.³¹¹ The function of proof and belief in contexts of persuasion, then, aims for more than intellectual assent to a proposition. It seeks an enlistment and agreement of desire. Thus, love and belief are deeply entwined for Augustine: "For if

³⁰⁹ David Tracy, "Charity, Obscurity, Clarity," p. 276.

³¹⁰ Debora K. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric: The Christian Grand Style in The English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 46. Quoted in Olmstead, *Rhetoric*, p. 35

³¹¹ Eric Auerbach, *Literary Latin*, p. 32.

someone lapses in his faith, he inevitably lapses in his love as well, since he cannot love what he does not believe to be true” (*DDC*, I.90).³¹²

If love enables belief and belief, in turn, is required for love, the issue is less one of certainty than of the assent of the will in love. The will healed by an infusion of charity is able to act upon its desires, a radical change from the broken will’s alienation from *potestas*. In the Prologue to the *VLA*, this action of the united will is conceived as the “taking up” of Thomas’s tales “as are useful.” This use is, I would argue, the adoption of the exemplary figure of Lutgard by the nuns who are to incorporate her *vita* into their reading practice and thus into their cultivation of a spiritual disposition modeled on Lutgard’s *life*.

In Book One of *DDC*, Augustine provides some clues to the pragmatics of how reading and interpretation might transform and persuade the unconverted or disbelieving. Addressing the moment when an interpreter encounters a passage that clashes with his old thoughts, he acknowledges that the reader’s first impulse is to disagree with the text. This initial gesture is dangerous, and “[i]f he encourages this evil to spread it will be his downfall.” This is so because in negating the demand of the text and thus disavowing the gap between the mind and the scripture, the reader no longer reads with faith. He writes,

For ‘we walk by faith, not by sight’ (2 Cor. 5:7), and faith will falter if the authority of holy scripture is shaken; and if faith falters, love itself decays. For if someone lapses in his faith, he inevitably lapses in his love as well, since he cannot love what he does not believe to be true. If on the other hand he both believes and loves, then by good conduct and by following the rules of good behavior he gives himself reason to hope that he will attain what he loves. So there are these three things which all knowledge and prophecy serve: faith, hope, and love (1 Cor 13:13). But faith will be

³¹² “Nam si a fide quisque ceciderit, a caritate etiam necesse est cadat. Non enim potest diligere quod esse non credit.”

replaced by the sight of visible reality, and hope by the real happiness which we shall attain, whereas love will actually increase when these things pass away. If, through faith, we love what we cannot yet see, how much greater will our love be when we have begun to see! And if through hope, we love something that we have not yet attained, how much greater will our love be when we have attained it! (I.89-91)³¹³

Faith consists, in part, in the submission of the intellect to the authority of scripture (or to God, as some advanced souls do without recourse to the mediations of scripture, see I.93). This submission is not an act of the intellect based on things seen. It is, rather, love of that which is not yet attained or seen, a love that seeks in hope, and which enables a person to behave in such a way that it is possible “he will attain what he loves,” eventually arriving at the consummation of that faith, hope and love in the beatific vision after death.

Yet how does such a submission of the intellect occur except through a faith and a love (an act of the will) that the text itself engenders (or the prior illumination of God)? In other words, if the will resists the demands of faith, then faith and love are impossible from the outset.

In book 8 of the *Confessions*, mentioned at the outset of this chapter, Augustine offers a powerful example of this problematic. Having already been transformed by “the books of the Platonists,” which converted him to a belief in the immateriality of God,

³¹³“Per fidem enim ambulamus, non per speciem; titubabit autem fides, si divinarum scripturarum vacillat auctoritas; porro fide titubante caritas etiam ipsa languescit. Nam si a fide quisque ceciderit, a caritate etiam necesse est cadat. Non enim potest diligere quod esse non credit. Porro si et credit et diligit, bene agendo et praeceptis morum bonorum obtemperando efficit ut etiam speret se ad id quod diligit esse venturum. Itaque tria haec sunt quibus et scientia omnis prophetia militat: fides, spes, caritas. Sed fidei succedet species quam videbimus, et spei succedet beatitudo ipsa ad quam perventuri sumus, caritas autem etiam istis decedentibus augebitur potius. Si enim credendo diligimus quod nondum videmus, quanto magis cum videre coeperimus? Et si sperando diligimus quo nondum pervenimus, quanto magis cum pervenerimus?”

Augustine continued to struggle with the submission of his will. His mind was “certain” (*certum*) of the truth of what he needed do, but his will was broken and weighed down by chains of habit the certainty of his mind could not shatter. Augustine describes himself in a state of extreme agitation, disgusted with his own recalcitrance and yet unable to give himself over to that part of his will that desired chastity. Fleeing to a garden at his Milanese house, he read Romans 13:13-14, “not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Rather put on (*induite*) the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh.” What it meant for him to be “convinced” or persuaded of this text was to acquire the capacity to act upon that to which his intellect had assented, to submit to the authority of a text that did not comport with his prior habits or disposition. In order to acquire this new disposition and capacity, he *assumed*—clothed himself in—the person of Jesus. The struggle for conversion, for submission to the code of scripture, is depicted here as the result of grace, but a grace that works in and through the text.

Commenting on the scene of conversion in the garden, Brian Stock notes that Augustine did not simply align himself with the directives of the text but first experienced a horrifying *distance* between his own state and that of the ideal stated in the text.³¹⁴ This experience of the gap enabled his repentance (precisely what was missing for Augustine in the Platonic writings), and through this, a submission of his will (and thus his body) to the divine command of chastity. The scripture was not only a sign of the invisible, absent *res*, but a mark of the distance between reader and the text. While

³¹⁴ Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 106-107.

reading in agitation because of this gap he writes, “a light of freedom infused my heart, dispelling all shadows of doubt” (*luce securitatis infusa cordi meo omnes dubitationis tenebrae diffugerunt*). While Stock renders *securitatis* as “certainty,” the word carries connotations less of intellectual confidence, and more a sense of freedom from anxiety, safety, and composure—an emotional state that stands in contrast to the agitation that introduces the scene. This *securitatis* contrasts with the “certainty” of book 7, a certainty arising from intellectual assent that was able to bring him only so far on his road to conversion. This security was what ultimately dispelled “doubt,” demonstrating that the persuaded reader is one whose will has been reconfigured and whose body has been transformed, not only convinced of a series of propositions.

If we return to the series of Pauline quotations that appear immediately before Augustine in Thomas’s prologue, we see that these passages together constitute a view of reading designed to address the *vita*’s implausibility in a deeply Augustinian way.

Thomas writes,

Since ‘charity believes all things, bears with all things’ (1 Cor. 13:7) I plead with those into whom ‘God has poured (*infudit*) the spirit of his charity’ (c.f. Rom 5:5)³¹⁵ that, in these matters, they believe ‘such things as are holy, such things as are useful’ (*utilia*) (c.f. Phil. 4:8), such things as are consonant with the truth, and at the same time patiently bear with such things as I might have put down in a less rhetorically pleasing or discerning (*indiscrete*) style.³¹⁶

³¹⁵ The Vulgate is “*caritas Dei diffusa est in cordibus nostris...*” Thomas’s use of *infusa* rather than *diffusa* may be a subtle allusion to *Confessions* 8.

³¹⁶ “Cum ergo caritas omnia credit, omnia sustinet; peto ab iis, quibus Deus spiritum suae caritatis infudit, ut credant his siqua sunt sancta, siqua utilia, siqua veritati consona proponuntur; simulque sustineant patienter, siqua minus apte, siqua minus litteratorie vel indiscrete posuero.”

One must read in love for this love believes “all things.” Love also enables the reader to “bear with” (*sustinet*) the allegedly bad grammar and poor style of Thomas’s writing. Thomas thus gives a strangely grand theological pressure to the humility *topos*; the reader’s capacity to accept the humble style of the text is evidence of an operation of grace working in them.

Romans 5:5, to which Thomas appeals, is an essential text for Augustine in his debates with the Pelagians, appearing in both *On the Spirit and the Letter* (412) and *On Grace and Free Will* (427). In both treatises it acts as a proof-text for the necessity of prevenient grace, that love that is first “shed abroad” in human hearts, transforming the will so that it is able to love the law rather than obey it in fear, and to act upon this transformed ontology.³¹⁷ By invoking Romans 5:5, Thomas circumscribes his addressees as those “into whom God has poured the spirit of his charity.”

This demarcation of audience by appealing to his readers’ status as those who have been infused with the love of God is the key rhetorical strategy Thomas uses in attempting to solicit the belief of his readers. Thomas appeals to readers’ status as already converted. Successful readers of the *vita* are those, he writes, who have received divine illumination necessary to recognize that the true topic of his hagiography is the *caritas* manifested in Lutgard. The corollary of this appeal is that the conversion of those who do not accept his text is called into question. Accepting Thomas’s text becomes proof that a

³¹⁷ Augustine, “Grace and Free Will,” trans. Robert P. Russell in *The Teacher. The Free Choice of the Will. Grace and Free Will* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1968), ch. 38, 39; *On the Spirit and the Letter*, trans. W.J. Sparrow Simpson D.D. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1925), ch. 56.

reader has been infused with grace. He borrows, for his own text, his reader's presumed prior acceptance of and submission to the authority of scripture.

Thomas thus uses the authoritative work of Augustine, initially elaborated for the interpretation of the scriptural canon, in the service of a new hagiographical, extracanonical text. He attempts to convert already-converted Christians to a new type of text and example. His elaborate humility *topos* implicitly places his work, if not on an equal footing with scripture, as having a comparable revelatory status, claiming for it the same necessity of grace on the part of the interpreter, and the same true topic, namely the love of God and neighbor as it is manifested in Lutgard.

Desire, Interpretation, and Proof

To read in love is, first, to submit to the authority of the text in an act of faith that Thomas argues is coterminous with his readers' faith because it draws upon their prior infusion of gracious love. Such a reader "bears with" or "endures" the implausibility and simplicity of the tale's narration as well as Lutgard's strangeness. The reader's passion is a key means to their identification with Lutgard, for it enables her "virtue and merit" to become models "taken up" by the reader, effectively increasing their own virtue and merit. Suspicion is overcome by a belief that is a work of love in faith.

However, the reader's identification with Lutgard, which could be understood to be—much like Augustine's taking up of Romans in the *Confessions*—submission to the authority of the textual exemplar, whether Lutgard or, in Augustine's case, Christ, is not one, I would argue, that Thomas understands to be the end of readerly desire and interpretive practice, but their incitement. Martyrdom to the text does not entail the

cessation of the reader's interpretive work. Despite the alignment of his text with scripture, Thomas is not setting himself up as an authority delimiting the interpretive scope of the reader. Rather, by assimilating the mechanics and topic of the *vita* to Augustine's understanding of scripture, Lutgard becomes the *res*, that referent that can be captured only by means of language that inevitably falls short of the capacities of the text's *signa*.

The type of reading Thomas's text suggests and Augustine's theory of signification allows, I would argue, is similar to that which Roland Barthes terms the "writerly text" (*le scriptable*). It contrasts with the juridical notion of the saint-as-proof that Dyan Elliott argues is fundamental to Thomas's hagiographical corpus. According to Barthes, the writerly text is one in which the reader is "no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text."³¹⁸ The reader as producer is, he argues, the goal of "literary work." In contrast to the writerly text, the "readerly" text (*le lisible*) is one in which the reader is made idle:

Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and reader. The reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness—he is intransitive; he is, in short, serious: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*.³¹⁹

³¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), p. 4.

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 4. "Notre littérature est marquée par le divorce impitoyable que l'institution littéraire maintient entre le fabricant et l'usager du texte, son propriétaire et son client, son auteur et son lecteur. Ce lecteur est alors plongé dans une sorte d'oisiveté, d'intransitivité, et, pour tout dire, de *sérieux*: au lieu de jouer lui-même, d'accéder pleinement à l'enchantement du signifiant, à la volupté de l'écriture, il ne lui reste plus en partage que la pauvre liberté de recevoir ou de rejeter le texte: la lecture n'est plus qu'un *referendum*. En face du text scriptible s'établit donc sa

The aim of literary work according to Barthes is to turn the reader into a “writer,” having an active engagement with the text, in contrast to those intimidated or lazy readers who simply “accept or reject” the text in a reading that is a “referendum.” The referendum is not unlike the juridical notion of persuasion in which the aim is to lead listeners to give a verdict of true or false, guilty or not guilty. The referendum attempts to determine the nature and status of the referent, that to which the signs refer, in an absolute and single moment that enables the reader to stop working.

The way that Thomas has framed his tale such that Lutgard is the *res* complicates the nature of reading hagiography in relation to the question of belief and doubt. The *res* to which the signs refer stands always in excess of the text’s signifiers. The referential work of signs is never resolved, and neither, then, is reading completed. Thus, interpretation must be more than assent to or dissent from the claims of the text. Thomas himself provides the best example of this notion of reading as writing. He appears in the *vita* not only as a superlative lover of Lutgard, but as an instance of the doubting reader he addressed in the Prologue.

The last chapters of the *vita* elaborate the surprising nature of the agreement between Thomas and the Abbess Hadewijch that Thomas says gave rise to the writing of the *Life*. Though Thomas claims that it was his love for the Abbess, the nuns of the Brabant, and Lutgard herself that impelled his writing, at the end of the *vita*, he describes how he wrote the tale in order that he might obtain her relic. Thomas arranged to receive Lutgard’s entire hand upon her death. Hearing this, however, Lutgard told Thomas that

contrevaieur, sa valeur négative, réactive: ce qui peut être lu, mais non écrit: le *lisible*. Nous appelons classique tout texte lisible.” (Barthes, *S/Z*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), p. 10).

he would receive the little finger of her right hand. Thomas, disbelieving her prophecy, protested that he intended to get the entire hand. When Lutgard died and Thomas approached Hadewijch for the agreed-upon relic, she refused to give it to him unless he first wrote her *Life*. He agreed to write it and in due course, received the very finger Lutgard had indicated he would. Thomas believed, he writes, that this trial was according to the

dispensation of God's counsel, for the Almighty had arranged a test (*ordinabat probare*) so that I might obtain Lutgard's finger according to her promise—the finger that my ignorant simplicity had once refused (*nescia simplicitas denegarat*). Once again I came to Aywières and, promising to write Lutgard's life, I received with immense and heartfelt joy the gift I desired more than gold or silver (III.19).³²⁰

Thomas had doubted Lutgard's words, insisting on his claim to her entire hand. He had to undergo a purgation of his incredulity and misplaced desire—by means of the test that is his writing and bearing with the disappointment of his hope for her hand—in order to obtain that which Lutgard herself had allowed. Thomas's testing had the further virtue of “proving” Lutgard to be a prophet (*si vere Prophetes pia Lutgardis esse probabitur*) according to her earlier prediction that only the little finger of her right hand would be amputated.

Thomas's account of how he came to write the *vita* also demonstrates the way in which a juridical discourse of proof and doubt are assimilated to an Augustinian one that is articulated in terms of love and the transformation of the subject who believes. Both

³²⁰ “Super eo ergo Abbatissam adiens preces supplices cum lacrymis fudi: sed cum magno dolore meo solam ipsam Abbatissam inexorabilem mox inveni: credo tamen quod non sine dispensatione superni consilii: probare enim Omnipotens ordinabat, ut secundum promissum piæ Lutgardis ejus digitum obtinerem, quem nescia simplicitas denegarat. Iterato autem secundum tempus in Aquiriam veni, vitamque piæ Lutgardis scribere promittens, cum ingenti cordis lætitia super aurum & argentum optatum munus accepi.”

Thomas's belief and Lutgard's prophetic powers are tested and proven (*probare*). The hagiography is, furthermore, meant to be proof of Lutgard's sanctity, containing tales like this one in which her prophecy is carefully attested to by worthy witnesses. However, the writing of hagiography does not only prove Lutgard. It is also Thomas's test in which he proves his love, devotion and belief. His writing was born of desire, most immediately for her finger, and more generally for the sake of his *amor flagrantissimus* and *caritas* for Lutgard, Hadewijch, and other nuns of the Brabant. Thomas, the reader of Lutgard, becomes a writer. The text that proves him is a work of desire, a space in which he is placed as a character and undergoes purgation and transformation.

Thomas justifies his desire for the finger of an as-yet uncanonized woman (*nondum adhuc canonizatae*) with reference to the story of Hugolino accepting the finger and *vita* of Marie of Oignies from James (*VMO-S*, 15-17). In these doubled stories of doubt—Hugolino's blasphemous doubt and Thomas doubting of Lutgard's prophecy—relic and text act as proofs of orthodoxy and saintly power. Marie's relic and *vita* are presented in the *Supplement* as efficacious because of Hugolino's great desire for them to work. Hugolino was, despite his blasphemous doubt, an already-converted soul, for he desired his own cure and was able to act upon that desire in reading—"incubating" (*incubuit*)—with the devotion of the bride of the Song of Songs, and clinging to Marie's relic with confidence.

Hugolino's story is, in part, an exemplum for the preachers to whom the text is dedicated. James gave Hugolino the *vita* and relic as a supplement to his counsel. James realized, as I noted at the outset of this chapter, that he needed to buttress the biblical words of comfort and arguments he spoke to Hugolino with examples of others cured of

the spirit of blasphemy. Such examples were to be found in Marie's *vita*, and they provided both illustrations of more abstract doctrine and, like her relic, effected Hugolino's cure by virtue of Marie's power, made present in the *vita*, to dispel blasphemy after her death (*VMO-S*, 16).

However, behind Hugolino lies the true addressee of the *Supplement*, James of Vitry. While Thomas writes in the *Supplement's* Prologue—addressed to Giles, a founder and Prior of St. Nicholas at Oignies—that he wrote the *vita* for Marie's admirers, who knew that James left many things out from his account for the sake of brevity and credibility, the *vita* was, in fact, an occasion for Thomas to write James's *Life* through his encounters with Marie. The text culminates in a *querela* (*VMO-S*, 24-27) in which Thomas berates James for quitting the apostolic life and his community in Liège for the grandeur of Rome. Marie's *Supplement* is, in effect, James's anti-hagiography. If Lutgard's *Life* was written for the sake of Thomas's love of his spiritual mother, the *Supplement* was written for the sake of his disappointed love in his spiritual father, James. The account of James's abandonment of Liège provides a second narrative of proof and disbelief within the *Supplement*. In it, however, James models the *failure* of love and belief, issuing ultimately in his falling away from what Thomas perceived to be his sanctity.

James's transfer to Rome was, Thomas argues, against the wishes of Marie, who made her desires clear to James. He, her most devout follower, discounted them. Hugolino's conversion from doubt to belief is thus a foil for and inversion of James's conversion from belief to disbelief. James becomes a figure for the failure not only of hagiographical but visionary rhetoric, as even Marie's persuasive efforts were to no avail.

James thus enacted the Augustinian problematic of the fallen will in the work of persuasion in a way that was much more pronounced than Hugolino. For Augustine, as we have seen, the rhetorical encounter does not only involve deliberation and choosing among various truth claims. Successful eloquence engages the desire of the will to act in accord with that to which the mind has assented. Successful rhetoric is a mode of speaking that unifies the fissured subjectivity of the fallen person. The preacher's task, according to Augustine, is to "reach people who know what they should do but do not do it."³²¹ According to Thomas, James knew what he should do—return to Liège—but his will was recalcitrant, and he refused—or was unable—to act on his knowledge.

James not only wrote about the life of poverty and penance he witnessed, but lived it as a canon at St. Nicholas priory in Oignies, where he met Marie when she retired there at the end of her life. However, his gifts as a preacher and eminent connections to people like Gregory IX led eventually to his being made the bishop of Acre (1216-27) and then the cardinal of Tusculum (1229-40). For Thomas, this entailed abandonment of his responsibility to the people of Liège and the simplicity of the apostolic life. The *Supplement* expresses Thomas's view that this humble life was not only what Marie desired for James while alive, but what she attempted to ordain from beyond the grave.

Thomas relates a tale of Marie's intercession on James's behalf. Once, when he was bishop of Acre and sailing to Rome, a terrible storm threatened the ship. Terrified of drowning, James clung to her relics suspended at his neck, pleading for her help, calling upon her merits and reminding her of the "special love" (*amore præcipuo dilexisti*) she bore him while on earth and promising to change his way of life (*VMO-S*, 21). Marie

³²¹ Wendy Olmstead, *Rhetoric*, p. 35. C.f. *DDC* IV.28.

dutifully appeared to James, telling him that he would be saved. She then predicted that James would consecrate five altars at Oignies, the last to the Trinity, and that there, “if you wish” (*si ipse volueris*), Christ will give you the peace that you [have] sought.” However, she ominously tells him “you are a man with a will of your own (*Sed tu, homo voluntatis tuæ*) and you have never wanted to accede to my counsels and the counsels of those who loved you spiritually” (*VMO-S*, 21).

Thomas writes that James “wished to test” (*probare volens*) this vision. He thus asked the Pope to release him from his episcopate and returned to Oignies, where the vision was confirmed. Two years later, however, James was again invited to Rome. When Prior Giles importuned Marie to keep James in Liège as it was likely he would become “entangl[ed] in some dignity” in Rome, she told him that because she was opposed to the journey, she would not accompany James. When Giles told James of his vision, he laughingly told him that not only had she told him the same, but that he “was not moved,” and said “I don’t believe it: indeed I certainly presume that...the pope will not detain me with him if I am unwilling” (*Præterea non credo, imo certus præsumo quod me...*) (*VMO-S* 23). James thus became an unbeliever. His certainty was pitted against the word of the saint, as the dignity of Rome was pitted against the apostolic ideals of the small community at Oignies. Thomas paints James as a man whose will, which could have given him the “peace he sought” in Oignies if he had acted on that desire delivered him instead to the alternative desire for the satisfactions of the cardinalate. “Unmoved” by Marie’s appearance, the *querela* of chapters 24-27 addressed to James and written in the grand style—which according to Augustine is the style necessary for addressing an audience which cannot do the good it knows—full of

unmitigated pathos, allusion, repetition, the hortatory subjunctive, and the central stark image of two “beautiful dead birds” that represent James’s ministry, is Thomas’s desperate attempt to convince James to return to Lotharingia. Addressing James, he writes,

So now I must turn to you, bishop of Tusculum and cardinal of the Roman curia. Anyone can see that the handmaid of God spoke most truly when she said you are a man with your own will. You were so obstinate in the face of the clear revelation of the handmaid of Christ that there was no way you could be turned from your own will. Brothers, let the bishop of Tusculum look and see if he has gained through his own will, if he has incurred damage from this, if he has omitted things which could have promoted the honour of Christ and the salvation of abandoned souls....O most honourable bishop, this is what you saw by divine revelation when you were located in our land...you testified that you saw in a divine revelation that blessed Gregory [Gregory IX] gave you two very beautiful, but dead, birds. Bishop Lambert, the martyr and bishop of Liège gave you one, but much prettier and alive. This is also what the most blessed woman Mary of Oignies, a prophetess without deceit, once foretold to you when she was alive: the blessed Lambert himself put a mitre on your head....The holy martyr Lambert...through the holy prayers of saintly men and women, does not cease offering you each day this bird of spiritual administration, stretched forth on the wings of contemplation, bright with the feathers of virtues, live with holy action...O man especially chosen by the Lord from among mortals, and yet remiss in such things, we are confident that you still burn inside with the divine fire...O beautiful and dead birds! The birds, I repeat, are dead....If they are dead, why are they favoured in place of the living one? Take care holy father, take care most reverend bishop, lest the dead birds provide you with stench rather than honour. The nature of things is known to be such that however pretty the birds are dead, when they are dead, they cannot last without decaying. (*VMO-S*, 24-27)³²²

³²² “Nunc igitur ad te mihi redeundum est, Tusculane Præsul, Romanæ Curiae Cardinalem. Verum quidem, ut in his quisquam potest advertere, verissimum Dei famula dixit, hominem voluntatis tuæ te esse contestans, qui utique ad tam evidentissimas ipsius Ancillæ Christi revelationes obstinatus ita fuisti, quod nullo modo moveri a voluntate propria potuisti. Videat ergo, Fratres, videat Tusculanus ille, si mediante effectum voluntatis suæ profecerit, si ullum ex eo damnum incurrerit, si aliqua interim prætermisit, quæ ad honorem Christi & salutem animarum desolataram proficere potuissent: quas scilicet animas salutis nostræ Princeps Jesus proprio sanguine & ignominiosa Crucis morte redemit... Hoc est enim quod vos, Optime Præsul, aliquando in nostris partibus positus divina revelatione vidistis. Diu antequam venerandus ille ac vere dignus Dominus Hugo, Ostiensis Episcopus, in dignitatem Apostolicam attolleretur; visum tibi in revelatione divina testatus es, quod B. Gregorius Papa, qui hunc utique qui modo est, &

Because visionary *and* historical experience of the saintly woman could not “move” him, Thomas attempted to use the grand style of rhetoric to do so. However, his rhetoric could not persuade James’s recalcitrant will. The good, in this instance, was highly resistible. James thus became the embodiment of the bad reader, one whose love for Marie and the community at Oignies did not persist. He stands in opposition to Hugolino, who began in a state of doubt and was cured by means of his devoted reading and relic. James on the other hand, began one whose hidden sanctity and capacity to save souls “forcefully impelled” Marie to kiss the places where he walked when they first met (*VMO-S*, 2).

Thomas wants readers to believe that the truly incredible wonder of the *Supplement* is not the material Thomas included about Marie that James had left out of his *vita* “lest...by including too much of the incomparable magnitude of revelations and miracles which is the fragrance of life in the hearts of believers but the odour of death [in the hearts of the unbelieving]” (*VMO-S*, Prologue). Rather, he declares it an “unprecedented wonder” (*incognitum monstrum*) that a bishop “of his own free will” renounced his episcopate, performing a true imitation of Christ (*VMO-S*, 25), a wonder that is recapitulated in deformed shape when he remained unmoved by Marie’s desire

nomine & actione demonstrat, duas tibi aves pulcherrimas, sed mortuas; beatus vero Lambertus Martyr & Episcopus Leodiensis, unam quidem, sed multo pulchriorem & vivam dedit: hoc est etiam quod ipsa beatissima mulier Maria de Oignies, Prophetissa quidem non fallax, tibi olim in vita prædixit, ipsum scilicet B. Lambertum Martyrrem mitram tuo capiti imposuisse... Hanc autem spiritualis administrationis, alis contemplationis exertam, pennis virtutum fulgidam, sancta vividam actione, sanctus adhuc Martyr Lambertus & Leodiensis Episcopus, per sanctas Sanctorum Sanctarumque preces, tibi quotidie offerre non cessat... O virum specialiter inter mortales a Domino præelectum, in talibus cessantem; qui licet in se ardeat, ut omnino confidimus, amore divino; tamen super candelabrum positum omnibus non lucentem! O aves pulchras & mortuas! Mortuæ sunt, inquam, aves...Cave igitur, Pater sancte, cave Reverendissime Præsul, ne aves mortuæ fœtorem tibi magis pariant quam honorem. Rerum enim natura habere dignoscitur, quod quantumlibet aves pulchræ, si vita careant, durare sine fœtore non possunt.” (Cols. 0675B-0676D)

that he remain in Lotharingia. Thus Thomas tells the reader to “be stunned” and “gaze on a miracle” (*Obstupesce, Lector, intueri miraculum*) (VMO-S, 23), namely James’s unmoved will in the face of his saintly mentor’s advice.

Conclusion

Thomas’s narrative of Hugolino’s conversion by means of the *vita* and relic (ca. 1230) demonstrates not only a great confidence in the power of these objects to effect a cure, but in the will of a converted soul to act upon that which it desires. When writing *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières* in 1246, Thomas reveals a greater insecurity about the capacity of a *vita* and its examples to convince and thus transform its readers. Thomas’s strategy for dealing with his sense of the resistibility of the *vita* and the recalcitrant nature of the broken will is to explicitly theorize the act of reading the *life* of a wondrous saint, providing a methodology for his readers based on his claim that their faith in the hagiography is an extension of their faith in scripture and is thus should be subject to the same readerly strategies. Thomas’s understanding of what it is to properly read a *life* does not change: Hugolino was an ideal reader in the terms of both the *Supplement* and the *VLA*. He approached the *vita* with love and faith, meditating on the text “vigilantly,” until he was able to “taste and see the sweetness of the Lord.” Testing and proving became a tasting that transformed. However, I would suggest that Thomas’s disappointment with James (who never did return, despite Thomas’s efforts to persuade him) and subsequent awareness of the limited capacity of hagiographical example to effect a change of the will, stand behind the self-conscious concern of the inherent (in)capacity of the *VLA* to

inspire belief, or, more properly, of the sufficiency of the proof of the example to render a reader faithful to a text.

Thomas's solution to this problem is to invoke the authority of Augustine and his rhetorical and hermeneutical theory in order to provide a theory of how to read the text. In the Augustinian understanding, the very obscurity of the *vita* and of Lutgard—her novelty and marvelousness—may become, Thomas implies, sites at which the reader can “exercise” his or her faith and in this exercise, “take up” the saint as an exemplar. Furthermore, by asking readers to treat the *vita* as scripture, Thomas in effect argues that belief in and understanding of the *life* requires the grace and love readers *already* possess by virtue of their faith. Only through such belief can the proofs offered by the text become truly convincing.

Therefore, while juridical proof occupies an important place in the *VLA*, the notion of reading articulated by Augustine as the education and engagement of love through grace is given priority by the Prologue, as it is the only sufficient solution to the problem of the text's credibility. Deliberation—engaging with and interpreting the *vita* while weighing its claims—in the rhetorical space of what Thomas conceives as an hagiographical psychogogy, then, leads to more than intellectual assent to an argument; the knowledge that arises from being convinced of the text's truth is dependent on and productive of love that issues in both the understanding and behavior of the reader. To be convinced is to be rendered faithful, not certain.

Chapter Four

Language, Literacy, and the Saintly Body

Introduction

Many years before her death, Thomas approached some nuns and lay brothers in order to arrange for the disposal of Lutgard's relics should she die during his absence. Thomas wanted her hand as "a sacred memorial" (*sacram memoriam*). The abbess Hadewijch agreed to his request. However, Thomas writes, repeating a medieval misogynistic commonplace, "since it is women's nature (*natura*) to be unable to keep secrets (as the vernacular proverb says, 'be quiet, woman—if you can'), the nuns told Lutgard how I had ordered her hand to be cut off."³²³

There follows a scene that demonstrates Lutgard's wit and authority with a vividness unprecedented in the *Life*. Thomas, who had just pled for the silence of woman, portrays himself coming to Aywières in order to have a conversation with Lutgard. Their speech turns quickly into a gentle duel. Thomas casts the scene as a kind of gruesome *hohe Minne*, one in which the castle is an abbey and the noble knight of God, who asks for the (dead) hand of his heroine, is granted only a small finger after proving himself with the labor of his writing, a token accepted as a sufficient reward for his ardor.

Making the first thrust in their conversation, Lutgard turns to him with a serious expression and says, "I have heard, dearest son (*fili carissime*), that you are already planning to cut off my hand after I die. (*manum mihi post mortem abscindere jam*

³²³ Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita Lutgardis Aquiriensis*, ed. by G. Henschen, in *Acta Sanctorum*, 16 June, III, pp. 187-209. English translation by Barbara Newman in *Thomas of Cantimpré, The Collected Saints' Lives* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), III.19. (Hereafter I will use the abbreviation *VLA* for this *life* and cite passage references within the body of the text).

disponis). I cannot imagine (*multum miror*) what you plan to do with my hand!” Thomas, blushing (*rubore perfusus*), responds, “I believe your hand would be good for my soul and body (*bonum animæ & corporis*), if I manage to get it—as I intend” (*si eam consequar, ut intendo*). After temporarily retreating, Thomas quickly recovers to boldly reassert his wish.

Although the language of the passage contrasts Lutgard’s baffled “wonder” with Thomas’s intentional “pursuit” (*consequar*), Thomas is not in control of the situation; Lutgard seems to be teasing him, displaying what he seeks and cannot have. “Serenely smiling,” she places her finger into Thomas’s view; it rises into the narrative field of vision, punctuating the scene of conversation with its still presence: “she laid the little finger of her right hand on the windowsill where we were speaking and said, ‘It will be enough for you if you are able to have this finger after my death’” (*Tunc illa, sereno, ut erat, vultu subridens, & auricularium digitum dextræ manus in subliminari fenestræ, in qua colloquebamur deponens, Satis, inquit, tibi sufficiet, cum istum digitum post mortem meam habere potueris*). Gaining confidence (*confidentius*), Thomas, echoing Lutgard’s words, offers subtle flattery while insisting on his original aim: “No part of your body could be enough for me, mother (*Nihil, inquam, mihi ex tuo, Mater, corpore sufficere poterit*), unless I had your hand or head to comfort (*relever*) me when I am bereft (*orbatus*) of your whole self.” The comfort provided by the relic, as the verb suggests, is a lifting up, a kind of resurrection, giving back to Thomas Lutgard’s presence, which death had stolen (*orbatus*).

As I related in the previous chapter, the little finger that Lutgard laid upon the windowsill was later removed, fulfilling her prediction. Thomas attempted to retrieve the

relic as promised by Hadewijch, but was refused, as she realized that some mutually beneficial negotiations were possible. So Thomas made another journey to Aywières, promising the abbess that he would write Lutgard's *Life* in exchange for "the gift I desired (*optatum*) more than gold and silver."³²⁴

For Alexandra Barratt, Thomas's anecdote displays the dichotomy of language and the body that she sees operating throughout the *vita*. It was she argues, "across [Lutgard's] mute and speechless body that her Latin *Life* was negotiated." Text was exchanged for body, a body whose gestures, raptures, and silence provide female

³²⁴ Annis pluribus ante mortem ejus plures Moniales & conversos Fratres instanter rogaveram, ut si contingeret, sicut heu! contigit, me in morte piæ Matris Lutgardis non esse præsentem; manum ejus abscissam mihi, ob sacram ejus memoriam, reservarent: & in hoc licentiam venerabilis Hawidis ejusdem loci Abbatissæ obtinueram. Ut autem feminarum natura est, celanda penitus celare non posse, secundum illud vulgare proverbium, Scilicet ut taceas femina, si qua potest; Moniales piæ Lutgardi, quid de abscindenda manu illius ordinaveram; indicarunt. Nec multo post, cum in Aquiriam veniens cum ea habere colloquium incepissem; ipsa me vultu intuens serio, dixit: Audivi, fili carissime, quia manum mihi post mortem abscindere jam disponis: tu autem quid de manu mea facere cogites multum miror. Ego igitur rubore perfusus; Credo, inquam, quod in bonum animæ & corporis mei tua mihi manus obveniet, si eam consequar, ut intendo. Tunc illa, sereno, ut erat, vultu subridens, & auricularium digitum dextræ manus in subliminari fenestræ, in qua colloquebamur deponens, Satis, inquit, tibi sufficiet, cum istum digitum post mortem meam habere potueris. Tum ego confidentius jam invectus: Nihil, inquam, mihi ex tuo, Mater, corpore sufficere poterit, nisi manum aut caput habeam, quo tunc relever te orbatus. His dictis ad alia verba descendimus, nihil alicui inde dicens, nihilque ponderans aut advertens. Ergo illa defuncta, ubi nondum adhuc elato in ecclesiam corpore in infirmaria servabatur, quidam Guido devotissimus juvenis, & alius socius suus, Fratres Conversi piæ Lutgardi manum abscindere cogitabant; sed cum hoc præsumere non auderent, eundem digitum dextræ manus, quem mihi sufficere dixerat, amputarunt, & dentes de ore ejus numero sexdecim extraxerunt. Cognita autem morte ejus, & digitum amputatum audiens, nec quis digitorum esset intelligens; Nunc, inquam, videbo lucidius, si vere Prophetes pia Lutgardis esse probabitur: quæ dextræ manus suæ auricularium mihi sufficere ante annos plurimos jam prædixit. Veni ergo in Aquiriam & eundem, sicut prædixerat, amputatum inveni, & per omnia mihi sufficere eum, & felicem me fore, si hunc obtinere possem sollicitus cogitavi. Super eo ergo Abbatissam adiens preces supplices cum lacrymis fudi: sed cum magno dolore meo solam ipsam Abbatissam inexorabilem mox inveni: credo tamen quod non sine dispensatione superni consilii: probare enim Omnipotens ordinabat, ut secundum promissum piæ Lutgardis ejus digitum obtinerem, quem nescia simplicitas denegarat. Iterato autem secundum tempus in Aquiriam veni, vitamque piæ Lutgardis scribere promittens, cum ingenti cordis lætitia super aurum & argentum optatum munus accepi. (VLA, cols. 0261B-0261F).

substitutes for linguistic competence in that very text.³²⁵ According to Barratt, the anecdote of Lutgard's finger is representative of the *vita*'s general attitude towards women. Lutgard's silence could be read as essential to her transcendence of her feminine nature (like the cessation of her menstruation, given to "tame the pride of Eve"), which, according to the proverb invoked by Thomas, makes it difficult for a woman to remain quiet. According to Barratt, Lutgard was (despite her winning way with words in this passage) a "mute body" insofar as it is her dead flesh that motivates Thomas to write her *Life*. What's more, within her own narrative, she figures as illiterate and capable of expression primarily through gestural rather than verbal means. The literate Thomas thus contrasts with the illiterate Lutgard, whose image he sculpts through a repetition of the illiteracy *topos*, a feature Barratt sees as "crucial to the demonstration of her sanctity."³²⁶

In the previous chapter, I argued that Thomas implicitly equates Marie's relic and *vita*—Thomas's other tale of a finger and a *Life*—in his description of Hugolino's conversion from blasphemy. Hugolino's story portrays the power of Marie's *vita* as metonymic, a means of grace that confers the immediacy of the saint's presence in a way that parallels her relic, providing an instantaneous and irresistible cure. I argued that in contrast that the *VLA* depicts hagiography as rhetorical: reader and writer enter a situation of persuasion and interpretation that Thomas acknowledges has uncertain outcomes. At stake in the *vita*'s persuasive efforts is whether readers will "take up" (*suscipiant*) Lutgard as an "exemplum." This taking up, I argued, is conducted through reading. The reader is a necessary partner in the author's work of persuasion. However, Thomas also

³²⁵ Alexandra Barratt, "Language and the Body in Thomas of Cantimpré's *Life of Lutgard of Aywières*," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, vol. 30.3 (1995): 346.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

believed that “suspicion” of the wondrous and novel nature of his subject could compromise readers’ capacity to “take up” his text. He attempted to assist his audience by theorizing the act of reading. The prologue shows that the reader reads this book in order to learn how to read. As the figure whose exemplarity manifests itself to readers only through a complex hermeneutics, it would seem that Lutgard herself should model the ideal reader. Why, then, would a text so self-consciously concerned with inculcating proper reading practices portray its *exemplum* as illiterate?

In this chapter I will argue that despite this depiction of Lutgard as illiterate, a portrait that according to Barrett depends upon a gendered dichotomization of text and body, male literacy and female illiteracy, the picture when read in its totality is more complex than Barratt suggests. As Barratt acknowledges, the *Life* demonstrates a fundamental ambiguity within the category of literacy as Lutgard shifts among what Barratt considers *incompatible* relations to Latinity and language more broadly: a “sense pervades [Thomas’s] text of an uneasy and paradoxical relation between Lutgard, language, and languages, of which Thomas himself fails to make sense.”³²⁷ On the one hand, Thomas has Lutgard confess herself to be an “unlettered, uncultivated, and uneducated nun” (*idiotae et rusticae et laicae moniali*) (I.12) and Thomas calls her “rather uncultivated (*rudis*) and very simple (*simplicissima*) in common speech” (I.15). Elsewhere, he makes her abjectly dependent on the learned Sybille de Gages for the interpretation of scripture and her own visionary experiences, such that Lutgard almost becomes the incidental channel for divine presence, her mind irrelevant to her sanctity (II.33). On the other hand, Thomas depicts Lutgard as capable of expert interpretation of

³²⁷ Barratt, “Language and the Body,” p. 340.

divine messages, whether by virtue of miraculous intervention or by her own successful engagement with the ruminative meditation upon and allegorical interpretation of visions.³²⁸

It is not, I would argue, sufficient to hold, as does Barratt, that Thomas simply offers a contradictory portrait of Lutgard's linguistic and literacy skills. Nor should we collapse the tension between literacy and illiteracy by prioritizing Thomas's representation of Lutgard as illiterate, indelibly marked as one having "trouble with language," while ignoring the ways in which he presents her as an exemplary reader. Neither approach attends to the complexity of her relation to language, textuality, and the body. While Barratt is correct to note that Thomas's presentation of Lutgard's literary and linguistic activity was multifaceted, his treatment is a generative tension within the *vita*, not a result of the sloppiness produced by misogynistic commonplaces. However, profound questions remain about Lutgard's actual level of literacy and the *symbolic function* of her simultaneous representation as illiterate and as a reader.³²⁹ What does

³²⁸ Including I.12; I.15; I.16; II.23; II.32; II.40; II.43; III.9.

³²⁹ Based on the *vita*'s representation of Lutgard's literacy, Barratt concludes that Lutgard had neither the education required for deeper interpretive exercise of the scriptures nor a literal understanding of Latin beyond the "passive" knowledge acquired from the repetition of certain passages in the daily rounds of monastic life (Barratt, p. 347). Barratt's contention that Lutgard had passive knowledge of Latin is based on Thomas's use of adjectives like *idiotae*, *rusticae*, and *laica* to describe Lutgard's relation to literacy. These descriptors contrast Lutgard with the *litteratis monialibus* surrounding her, and the *magis litterata* Sybille de Gages. However, it is unlikely that the prioress of a monastery would be illiterate in the most profound sense of the word, as she would presumably have correspondence to keep up and would be constantly participating in the complexities of the full monastic liturgy, which is far more extensive than repeated recitation of the Little Hours. Thus, even if we grant that her Latin was acquired aurally and used verbally, which in itself is doubtful given her responsibilities as Prioress, the term "passive" to describe such acquisition does not sufficiently capture the amount of Latin she would need to perform her liturgical duties. See Anke Passenier, "Women on the Loose," in *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, ed. Ria Kloppenborg and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 1995), p. 80, n. 62.

Thomas's narrative stand to gain in its construal of Lutgard's relation to language? How do the complexities of his representation fit our understanding of the illiteracy *topos*?

In what follows I will argue that Thomas's ambiguous representation of Lutgard's relation to textuality makes sense only when we understand that he was employing Cistercian monastic authors to portray, in a hagiographical mode, a theology of reading.³³⁰ The monastic understanding of reading, I will argue, offers a key to understanding Thomas's seemingly contradictory representation of Lutgard as illiterate, and yet also a masterful reader. The monastic theorization of the performativity of reading—the way in which devotional reading practices inculcate an understanding that is affective, bodily, and intellective, such that the reader's body and soul become homologous with the scriptures—demonstrates that we cannot assume that Thomas's work reproduces dichotomies between literacy and bodiliness, textuality and experience, literate men and illiterate women, knowledge obtained from a book and that which is divinely infused. As Benedicta Ward notes, this mode of engagement with the scripture was:

an action of the whole person, by which the meaning of a text was absorbed until it became prayer. It was frequently compared to eating—
'Taste by reading, chew by understanding, swallow by loving and

³³⁰The Cistercian order was founded as a reformed monastic order in 1098 by Robert of Molesme. Believing that Benedictine monasticism no longer reflected the simplicity or austerity demanded by the Rule of Benedict, he founded a "New Monastery" in the "wilderness" at Cîteaux. A balance of manual labor and prayer, asceticism, poverty, and charity were cornerstones of the monks' vocation, practices that they understood to be necessary for the observance of the Rule *ad apicem litterae*. The entrance of Bernard of Clairvaux in 1113 marked the beginning of a period of international expansion for the order. The movement was established in 1132 in the Low Countries in Cambrai, and found immense success there. The monastery of Villers was established in 1146, and at Aulne in 1147. See J.C.H Blom, ed. *History of the Low Countries*, trans. by James Kennedy (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), and Simone Roisin, "Sainte Lutgarde d'Aywières dans son Ordre et son Temps," *Collectanea Ordinis Cisterciensum Reformatorem*, vol. 8 (1946), pp. 161-2.

rejoicing' [citation from Anselm's *Meditation on Human Redemption*], and the text 'O taste and see how gracious the Lord is' was applied more often to the reading of the scriptures than to the Eucharist before the twelfth century.³³¹

The monastic understanding of devout reading that underlies Lutgard's representation, further complicates the notion of "literacy" as Latinity. *Lectio divina* introduces another set of criteria determining the successful reader, and these criteria are, I argue, operative in Thomas's representation of Lutgard. For Thomas, literacy is best understood as the capacity to engage with scripture in a way that overcomes any division between text and reader, engaging body and mind such that the reader comes to *embody* the text.

Building on the work of twelfth-century theologians who developed an analogy between scripture and that which is inscribed on the interior of each person (*liber conscientiae* and *liber cordis*), Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was an important witness to the performative notion of meditative reading of scripture in the Cistercian tradition.³³² Bernard opens *Sermons on the Song of Songs* with the statement that the Song "is learned by experience alone" (*sola addiscit experientia*).³³³ Readers of the Song

³³¹ *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm*, trans. and introduction by B. Ward (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 43-4. Quoted in V. Gillespie, "'Lukyng in huly bukes': *Lectio* in some Late Medieval Spiritual Miscellanies," *Analecta Cartusiana* 106 (1984), p. 2.

³³² For an account of some of these twelfth century texts, including the works of Pierre de Blois, Pierre Comestor, and Guigo II, see Jean Leclercq, "Aspects Spirituels La Symbolique du Livre au XIIe Siècle," *L'Homme Devant Dieu: Mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac*, vol. 2 Théologie, 57 (1964), pp. 63-72. Leclercq argues that whereas the notion of the book of conscience was understood by patristic authors to contain the list of one's deeds to be opened at the Last Judgment, in the twelfth century, the metaphor was reprised and extended to apply to the entirety of the moral life, as the conscience and heart were described as books that must be continually opened in order to be read and written by the living person in accord with the Book of Life, which the (probably Cistercian) author of *Sur la demeure interieure* identified with Christ, the soul's exemplar (p. 66).

³³³ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Sermon 1, V. 11. Latin from Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, "Sermones in Cantica Canticorum", 0794A.

must look in their “book of experience” (*liber experientiae*) in order that a new experience, one constituted in and through the Song, may occur:

Today we read the book of experience (*Hodie legimus in libro experientiae*). Let us turn to ourselves and let each of us search his own conscience about what is said. I want to investigate whether it has been given to any of you to say, “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth” (Song of Songs 1:1).³³⁴

Turning first to his own “book of experience,” the monk discerns where he stands in comparison to the ideal lover of God, the bride. The goal is “to see the gap between one’s own experience of God’s love and one’s own love for God and then to meditate on, chew over, and digest the words of the Song so that one might come more fully to inhabit them.”³³⁵ While Guibert of Nogent (d. ca. 1124) wrote that all Christians should be able to read within themselves, as though within a book, the temptations and sin described in sermons and scripture,³³⁶ Bernard promised another field of experience for the select few who assimilated their desire and practice to that of the bride through an examination of conscience, asceticism, and devout reading of the Song: the monk might ultimately *become* the bride, able to say with a fullness of desire, “let him kiss me with the kiss of

³³⁴ *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Sermon III, I. “Hodie legimus in libro experientiae. Convertimini ad vos ipsos, et attendat unusquisque conscientiam suam super his quae dicenda sunt. Explorare velim, si cui unquam vestrum ex sententia dicere datum sit: *Osculetur me osculo oris sui*” (Cantic. I, 1).

³³⁵ Amy Hollywood, “Spiritual but not Religious,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, vol. 38, nos. 1 & 2 (Winter/Spring 2010), p. 24; Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism. The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol 2. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1994), p. 26; McGinn notes that the mutual imbrication of text and experience undermines a view of mysticism as spontaneously autobiographical or a result of “direct experience” that somehow stands independently from a theological matrix. See also Jean Leclercq, “Aspects Spirituels,” p. 70-71.

³³⁶ “Cum unusquisque intra seipsum, quasi in libro, scriptum attendat quidquid de diversis tentationibus praedicatoris lingua retractat,” *PL* 156, 26. Quoted in Leclercq, “Aspects Spirituels,” p. 70.

his mouth.”³³⁷ The ritual of ruminative reading along with the other tasks of monastic life are intended to cultivate this capacity to stand in the place of the bride, to experience her *agon* of desire and union with the bridegroom. Understanding, then, is a matter not of *scientia* but of *experientia*, and the readerly method of attaining to such an experience involves not only a turn to the book of experience in which is contained memories of bodily actions and desire, but requires a reading that is traditionally figured as a bodily practice.

In the *VLA*, the illiteracy *topos* does not function as a means to bifurcate the realms of textuality and experience, but to demonstrate, in a Bernadine manner, their interdependence. Furthermore, by using tropes of illiteracy and literacy, Thomas represents Lutgard as both a masterful reader yet eminently humble. We will see that the *vita* represents a profound relationship between reading, experience, and the body, a relationship driven by Cistercian theologies of reading. Lutgard was, indeed, a model reader, but one who read according to Cistercian ideals.

My argument builds upon Simone Roisin’s contention that the *VLA* is theologically and generically indebted to the Cistercian milieu, which so fascinated Thomas.³³⁸ His interest in Cistercian theology and hagiography, Roisin argues, is most explicitly apparent in the *VLA*, his final hagiography (though it can be seen as early as the

³³⁷ Leclercq, “Aspects Spirituels,” p. 70.

³³⁸ Simone Roisin was the first to identify the *VLA* as emerging from a “Cistercian milieu,” and engaging with the concerns and themes dominant in Cistercian spirituality. See *L’Hagiographie Cistercienne dans le Diocèse du Liège au XIIIe siècle* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l’Université, 1947), and Roisin, “La méthode hagiographique de Thomas de Cantimpré,” in *Miscellanea Historica In honorem Alberti de Meyer. Universitatis catholicae in oppido lovaniensi iam annos XXV professoris* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l’université, 1946).

Life of Margaret of Ypres, 1237).³³⁹ This Cistercian influence is evident in a new focus on the internal dynamics of piety, a “drama of God in the total conquest of the soul”³⁴⁰ and the concomitant representation of sanctity as a matter of interiority rather than a succession of extraordinary paramystical deeds manifest in the body (such as levitations, trances, preservations from physical danger, and the traversing of dangerous rivers) that mark his earlier works.³⁴¹ Roisin’s thesis thus directly counters Barratt’s contention that the *VLA* represents the saint primarily through bodily means. However, this chapter will show that the positions of Barratt and Roisin can be partially reconciled by a closer examination of the Cistercian theological milieu that Roisin identifies as central to the *VLA* and the performative nature of the reading practices undertaken by monks and nuns within this milieu.

The ambiguities surrounding female literacy are not unique to this *vita*. Scholarly engagement with the question of medieval literacy, particularly in relation to women, is ongoing and elaborate.³⁴² In what follows, I will briefly outline some of the most recent arguments concerning literacy, women, and the representation of reading in the later

³³⁹ Except for the finishing touches he placed on the *Life of Abbot John of Cantimpré* at the end of his life.

³⁴⁰ Roisin, “La méthode hagiographique de Thomas de Cantimpré,” p. 554.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 553.

³⁴² For consideration of the subject, see for example Thérèse de Hemptinne and María Eugenia Góngora, eds. *The Voice of Silence: Women’s Literacy in a Men’s Church* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004); Diane Watt, *Medieval Women’s Writing: Works by and for Women in England, 1100-1500* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007); Anneke B. Mulder-Baker and Liz H. McAvoy, eds. *Women and Experience in Later Medieval Writing: Reading the Book of Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). The *locus classicus* for this discussion is Herbert Grundmann, “Litteratus-illitteratus: Der Wandel einer Bildungsnorm vom Alterum zum Mittelalter,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 40 (1958) (Köln: Böhlau Verlag): 1-65.

Middle Ages. I will then consider the theory of reading in the Christian monastic tradition and turn to Thomas's depiction of Lutgard's relation to language and the text.

***Litteratus-illitteratus* and the *topos* of the illiterate holy woman in the Middle Ages**

As a Dominican hagiographer, Thomas addressed his work to multiple audiences. In the case of Lutgard's *Life*, the most obvious audience is the nuns of Aywières, who commissioned the *vita*, and more broadly the "nuns of Brabant," including, for instance, the Benedictine nuns of St. Catherine's who did, in fact, have a copy of the *vita Lutgardis* among their possessions.³⁴³ The Cistercian nuns of Lutgard's convent (and all other Cistercian convents, given the great concern for uniformity of practice within the order) would have undertaken the same liturgical practices as Lutgard, practices that included the reading and singing of the Psalms and other prayers during the eight offices of the day, daily Mass, as well as the extra liturgical offices on feast days and at burials.³⁴⁴ A fairly high level of Latin would be required to fulfill these daily liturgical tasks.³⁴⁵ There would, however, be gradations of literacy in a convent, as Thomas shows in his portrayal of the *magis litterata*, Sybille de Gages.

³⁴³ A. Deboutte, *De Heilige Lutgart* (Tentoonstelling uitgave van de Gilde van Sint Lutgard, 1963), pp. 19-29.

³⁴⁴ Julie Kerr, "An Essay on Cistercian Liturgy," pp. 5-12.
http://cistercians.shef.ac.uk/cistercian_life/spirituality/Liturgy/Cistercian_liturgy.pdf.

³⁴⁵ Perhaps in response to these grades of literacy within the monastery, and in order to facilitate the use of the text as an exemplum for the sisters, Martinus Cawley suggests that the Old French version of the *vita* was composed by Sybille de Gages herself. (Martinus Cawley, osco, ed. *The Lives of Ida of Nivelles, Lutgard and Alice the Leper* (Lafayette OR: Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey, 1987), on the unnumbered page, "Important note on the Latin text.") A transcription of the Old French version is available in G. Hendrix, "Primitive Versions of the *Vita Lutgardis*," *Cîteaux* 29 (1978): 153-209.

The nuns living in the convents of the Southern Low Countries would have been beneficiaries of the availability of education to children, male and female, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As I noted in the introduction, accessibility to education in the three “R’s” was encouraged by the rise of the merchant class, which beginning in the twelfth century wrested exclusive pedagogical control away from the church, and cities provided subsidies for impoverished elementary-school aged children in many urban centers. These schools were typically co-ed, and even when differentiated by gender, there was no apparent difference between levels of education. When a gendered difference in education did appear, it was at the higher levels. Most girls did not become *fluent* in Latin, although there were some schools dedicated to the higher education of women, and further teaching in Latin would have occurred when a woman entered a convent.³⁴⁶ An ability to read and write the vernacular was thus deemed important for both genders in the Southern Low Countries. Below, I will examine in detail the category and term “litteratus” in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, at which time, we will see, meant a person able to read and write in *Latin*. However, as Walter Simons’ work indicates, in the Southern Low Countries in the twelfth century the gravitational force exercised by Latin began to give way to the vernacular. This effects of this shift can be seen not only in the secular urban schools training the future citizens for the new economy, but in devotional contexts as well. Lambert le Bègue’s trial documents reveal that practices of *lectio divina* were emerging from the monastery in the twelfth century and being taken up by the laity. His followers read portions of vernacularized scripture

³⁴⁶ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 7.

with techniques derived from monastic practice.³⁴⁷ Writing in the midst of this shift, Thomas's depiction of a nun born of a merchant father in the important town of Tongeren—and thus certainly educated in vernacular literacy, and who, furthermore, became a nun in an order that highly valued Latin literacy—renders the terminological terrain more ambiguous.

The adjective *laica*, often applied to Lutgard, can be understood as a substitute for *illiterata*. The antithesis of *illitteratus* and *litteratus* is Roman in origin and referred not only to the ability to read, but, in writers like Cicero, to the condition of being learned. Over the course of the medieval period, the antithesis was slowly aligned with a distinction between *laicus* and *clericus*.³⁴⁸ The association of the clerical caste with the literate, meaning those who had the ability to read Latin, was a means for the clergy to institute their privileged status over and against an illiterate laity. By the twelfth century, however, the antithesis did not necessarily correspond to the ordained and lay states; a knight who was literate could be called *clericus*, while a priest who was illiterate could be termed *laicus*.³⁴⁹ M.T. Clanchy argues that for medieval people, literacy did not refer to the minimal ability to read and write in the vernacular or Latin, nor was the ability to sign one's name a mark of literacy. He argues that until 1300, literacy meant Latinity (vernacular grammars were not yet sufficiently codified to be systematically taught), including the ability to read, understand, compose by dictation, write verse, and express

³⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

³⁴⁸ Herbert Grundmann, "Litteratus-illitteratus: Der Wandel einer Bildungsnorm vom Alterum zum Mittlealter," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 40 (1958) (Köln: Böhlau Verlag): 7-8.

³⁴⁹ M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record. England, 1066-1307* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 180.

oneself in Latin. Until the fourteenth century, then, there was a “high” view of literacy, one that did not refer to the capacity to write (which Clanchy argues, against Grundmann, was aligned with the artisanal crafts and considered an entirely separate skill from reading)³⁵⁰ or to read and speak vernaculars. Literacy, furthermore, implied an ability to interpret what one has read. “Idiots” were those who could speak only their mother tongue; the *Lexicon des Papias*, ca. 1050, defines *idiota* as “propria vel rustica lingua contentus.”³⁵¹

Thomas shares the “high” view of literacy outlined by Clanchy. The criteria for naming Sybille de Gages—Lutgard’s fellow nun and supporter—“literate” seems to be her ability to read, interpret, compose verse, and presumably express herself in Latin. Despite the deployment of the classic antithesis of *litterata/illitterata* and the related terms *rustica*, *idiota*, and *laica* to describe Lutgard, however, Thomas’s representation of Lutgard’s relation to language cannot be summed up by such neat terminological considerations. Likewise, D.H. Greene has argued that Grundmann’s genealogy of *litteratus/illitteratus* and *clericus/laicus* cannot explain the shifting terminology of the later Middle Ages, when, for instance, a literate knight might be called *clericus*; nor, more importantly, can it provide an account of vernacular literacy as its status changes in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and which I have noted was occurring in the Southern Low Countries as early as the twelfth century.³⁵²

³⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 181.

³⁵¹ Herbert Grundmann, “Litteratus-illitteratus,” p. 8.

³⁵² D.H. Green, “Orality and Reading: The state of research in Medieval Studies” in *Speculum* vol. 65 no. 2 (April 1990): 275-6.

The significance of the term *illiteratus* only became more complex when applied to women in the later Middle Ages. Despite its illustrious male exemplar, Antony of Alexandria, the *illiteratus topos* came to be marked as feminine in the later Middle Ages. Anke Passenier has shown how, when applied to “simple” holy women, the *topos* was used in the thirteenth century to create a distinction between religious women (particularly, for Passenier’s interests, beguines), whose knowledge came from a divine source, and clerics who learned through books. Such a division of authority functioned in two ways. Some, like Robert of Sorbon, favorably compared beguine simplicity to the learnedness of the clerics. He said that on the Day of Judgment, a simple beguine would have more assurance of her salvation than a learned theologian or magistrate.³⁵³ The *topos*, however, also served to protect the priestly sphere of authority from the encroachment of the *mulieres religiosae*. By emphasizing the charismatic nature of women’s authority, rather than that derived *ex officio* (an office increasingly obtained through accreditation by a male-only university), clerics were protected from female intrusion on their privileged space.³⁵⁴

The feminization of the *illiteratus topos* was used as a marker not only of gender and as form of male protectionism against female encroachment, but also as a mark of class. In her study of thirteenth-century Brabantine male *conversi*, Martha Newman demonstrates that these *vitae* complicated the traditional association of woman with body and man with spirit, of literacy with masculinity and illiteracy with femininity. Literacy, she argues, was the dominant means to distinguish between groups of people within a

³⁵³ Ernest McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, with special emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1954), 420. Quoted in Passenier, “Women on the Loose,” p. 80.

³⁵⁴ Passenier, “Women on the Loose,” p. 80.

Cistercian monastery and a key way in which hagiographers maintained a hierarchy of privilege between choir monks and lay brothers. *Conversi* like Brother Arnulf (d. 1228) who were forbidden from learning to read, followed a radically different liturgical and devotional life than choir monks, and were understood to be best fit for manual rather than intellectual labor. Like many women in mendicant-authored hagiographies, male *conversi* were said to manifest their spiritual practice through somatic means. Choir monks participated in a “textual community” based on a common interpretation of the Song of Songs, in which the male monk took up a feminized position in relation to God, and thus lived out the Cistercian ideal of loving submission to God as a bride to the divine groom. *Conversi*, in contrast, were represented not as brides of Christ but as virile ascetics who performed literal imitations of Christ’s suffering. Thus, although the male *conversus* occupied a “feminine” position according to the terms of the illiteracy *topos*, this was in order to assign him a *masculine* position in relation to God, even as the choir monk used nuptial imagery of the passive bride from scripture to feminize himself in relation to God, a feminization that proceeded from his access to the reserved texts of scripture.³⁵⁵ Newman argues that early Cistercian hagiography depicted women using the nuptial imagery of the choir monks but slowly assimilated nuns to *conversi*, describing them in terms that were increasingly somatic and focused on physical *askesis* rather than reading.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁵ “Crucified by the Virtues: Monks, Lay Brothers, and Women in the thirteenth-century Cistercian Saints’ Lives,” in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer et al., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 182-209.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

Not all holy women of the thirteenth century, however, were described as *illitterata*. We will see below the importance given to the literacy of the nuns of Aywières in the *Vita Lutgardis*, particularly the extremely learned Sybille de Gages. The biographer of Juliana of Cornillon (b. 1153) says that she was able to read the Bible in Latin and French as well as Augustine and Bernard, and that she could infer the spiritual meaning of various passages.³⁵⁷ Such literacy on the part of some saintly women was not represented as performing the same function as it did for men in late medieval *vitae*. Katrien Heene has shown that in a much greater proportion than men, women were said to read in order to build up their virtue and piety, while male literacy was usually connected with the knowledge required to perform the office of a priest, preacher, or head of a noble household.³⁵⁸ Heene argues that the *vitae* did not explain such a gendered difference with misogynistic rationale drawn from the contemporary rhetoric of the universities. Following Prudence Allen, she notes the rise of a misogynistic discourse of sex polarity adopted from Aristotle in the schools of the thirteenth century.³⁵⁹ According to this view, men and women were conceived as different and hierarchically graded, with man superior. Applying such an understanding to the lives of nuns in *De eruditione praedicatorum*, the Master General of the Dominicans, Humbert of Romans (d. 1277), wrote that as women were less intelligent than men, literacy should not be an issue of

³⁵⁷ *Vita Iulianae* AASS April 1 (1675), pp. 435-75. Quoted in Katrien Heene, “‘De litterali et morali earum instructio’: Women’s Literacy in thirteenth-century Latin Agogic Texts,” in *The Voice of Silence*, ed. Thérèse de Hemptinne and María Eugenia Góngora, p. 155.

³⁵⁸ Heene, “‘De litterali et morali earum instructio,’” p. 163.

³⁵⁹ See Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman*. [v. 1] *The Aristotelian revolution, 750 BC-AD 1250*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997).

great concern for Dominican nuns.³⁶⁰ However, while university discourse was extremely powerful (and many of the male hagiographers Heene studies, including Thomas of Cantimpré, were trained in the schools), she shows that the *vitae* did not explain women's learning as divine condescension miraculously provided as compensation for feminine deficiencies. While gendered, literacy and illiteracy were not buttressed by scholastic misogyny. However, the use of literacy for the building up of virtue within an individual life, as distinct from the public, institutional power of men—whether or not this split is figured in Aristotelian-inspired misogynistic absolutes—is an instance of the division of power between public and private, official and charismatic learning, in which the sphere of public influence is politically privileged.

Furthering Passenier's observation that the *vitae* often contrast learning through experience with book learning, Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker and Liz Herbert McAvoy have explored in depth the relation between learning from experience and the *topos* of the illiterate woman. They note that thirteenth-century male hagiographers often described their female subjects as learning through trial and error (*experimento docta*) in relation to their description as *illitterata*.³⁶¹ While men produced and expounded on written materials, having been trained from the twelfth century onwards in the university, women

³⁶⁰ Joan Ferrante argues that thirteenth-century Dominican nuns were, in fact, highly literate. Humbert of Romans' declarations and the reality of actual practice did not coincide. See "The Education of women in the Middle Ages in Theory, Fact, and Fantasy," in *Beyond their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past*, ed. Patricia H. Labalme (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

³⁶¹ Thomas Aquinas argued that learning from letters, as any acquired knowledge, is empiric, thus troubling the distinction between experience and the book made by clerics and hagiographers. See *STh*, IIIa.9.2.

were “experts in nonintellectual, experiential ways of knowing.”³⁶² Rather than read, women were said to learn from the “book of experience,” as in the *vita* of the anchoress Yvette of Huy (d. 1228) by Hugh of Floreffe, a Premonstratensian canon who wrote that “events taught her rather than words as she learned from the book of experience” (*rebus potius, quam verbis edocta, prout in libro experientiae didicerat*).³⁶³ In the case of religious wisdom, knowledge was said to be divinely infused, as in Beatrice of Nazareth’s Latin *life*, and imprinted on the body in states of ecstasy.³⁶⁴ Thus, the notion that women know through experience, whether of the quotidian or exalted spiritual variety, was buttressed by the medieval association of women with the body.³⁶⁵

Insofar as my consideration of the performative nature of monastic reading undermines the distinction between textuality and experience, my argument bears a family resemblance to Mulder-Bakker and McAvoy’s observation in *Women and Experience in Later Medieval Writing* that the dichotomy between learning-by-the-book and experience as presented in many late-medieval *vitae* is undermined by information within those same texts; women who were said to be unable to read were also shown to

³⁶² Anneke B. Mulder-Baker and Liz H. McAvoy, eds., *Women and Experience in Later Medieval Writing: Reading the Book of Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 1.

³⁶³ *Vita Beatae Juettae sive Juttae, viduae reclusae*, AASS, 13 January: vol. 2, cols. 145-169, 2.14. Trans. by Jo Ann McNamara (Toronto: Peregrina, 2000), 44. Quoted in Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, ed. *Women and Experience*, p. 2.

³⁶⁴ Beatrice’s hagiographer wrote that her mother taught her to read the Psalter when she was only five. Beatrice was represented by the *topos* of the “diligent pupil.” However, she was said to only understand deeper theological mysteries when in ecstasy, and these insights did not remain present in her mind once she returned to a state of consciousness. See Katrien Heene, “*De litterali et morali earum instructione*,” pp. 153-5.

³⁶⁵ On the pervasiveness of this association, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 217.

be reading, writing, and teaching others, in part through the authority and knowledge they were said to garner from their learning by experience. The editors' concern is to undermine the distinction between women as illiterate who through experience and the definition of literacy as book learning (for the volume, vernacular or Latin); they show that women of experience do, in fact, produce literature. However, their volume does not explore the medieval theological background of the term "experience" or its relation to reading in monastic practice. In their volume, experience remains an entirely separate category from textuality. Experience is treated as prior to textual production, which is understood to express experience, a view incompatible with Cistercian understanding. In order to understand the relation of reading and experience in the *VLA*, then, the question of their relation must be considered in light of their Cistercian conceptualization.

"That what we read may be performed in us": Reading in a Monastic Milieu

The Cistercian conception of monastic reading first entered the West primarily through the work of Cassian (ca. 360-430), a vital source for the *Rule* of Benedict (ca. 500), which was the rule Cistercians attempted to follow "to the letter." Reading the scriptures was understood to be a painstaking cultivation of affective states through repeated recitation, rumination, and meditation on the words of the Bible.³⁶⁶ Benedict prescribed the gathering of monks eight times a day for the collective recitation of the Psalms and other prayers, a cycle of repetition based on the Psalmist's words, "Seven times a day have I praised you" (Psalm 119:164) and "At midnight I arose to give you

³⁶⁶Jean Leclercq, *Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. by Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), p. 73.

praise” (Psalm 119:62).³⁶⁷ The monks also had carefully regulated private reading practices in which they read the scriptures, as well as Cassian, Basil, and other Patristic authors.³⁶⁸ Such repetition was not aimed at the cultivation of listless drones. The monk’s task was to develop and intensify his own experience of God through the words of the Psalmist; “the monk was called on to *feel* what the psalmist felt, to learn to fear, desire, and love God in and through the words of the Psalms themselves.”³⁶⁹ The words of the scripture would thus come to seem as though they were written specially *for* and *by* the reader, so perfectly assimilated that they would come to “belong to him,” turning the monk from *lector* to *auctor*.³⁷⁰

In “On Prayer,” Conference Ten of Cassian’s *Conferences*, which teaches the technique of perpetual prayer by repeating simple biblical phrases until they become embedded in the heart, Abba Isaac outlines for Cassian and Germanus the way in which the monk as reader becomes the author of the scriptural text:

Thriving on the pasturage [of the prophets and the apostles] that they always offer and taking into himself all the dispositions of the psalms, he will begin to repeat them and to treat them in his profound compunction of heart not as if they were composed by the prophet but as if they were his own utterances and his own (*proprium*) prayer. Certainly he will consider that they are directed to his own person, (*ad suam personam*) and he will recognize that their words were not only achieved by and in the prophet in times past but that they are daily borne out and fulfilled in him.

³⁶⁷ Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of St. Benedict 1980*, ed. Timothy Frye, O.S.B. (The Liturgical Press, 1981), ch. 16, p. 211. My account of Benedict’s ritualization of reading through Cassian is indebted to Amy Hollywood’s reading in “Spiritual but not Religious,” pp. 18-26.

³⁶⁸ *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ch. 73, p. 297. In *Love of Learning*, p. 13-14 Leclercq conjectures that the library of Benedict’s monastery would also have contained Donatus, Priscian, Quintillian, and perhaps a few classical authors.

³⁶⁹ Amy Hollywood, “Spiritual but not Religious,” p. 22.

³⁷⁰ John Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, p. 76.

For divine Scripture is clearer and its inmost organs, so to speak, are revealed to us when our experience (*experientia*) not only perceives but even anticipates its thought, and the meanings of the words are disclosed to us not by exegesis but by proof. When we have the same disposition (*affectus*) in our heart with which each psalm was sung or written down, then we shall become like its author, grasping its significance beforehand rather than afterward. That is, we first take in the power of what is said, rather than the knowledge of it, recalling what has taken place...in daily assaults whenever we reflect on them...For we find all of these dispositions expressed in the psalms, so that we may see whatever occurs as in a very clear mirror and recognize it more effectively. Having been instructed in this way, with our dispositions for our teachers, we shall grasp this as something seen rather than heard, and from the inner dispositions of the heart we shall bring forth not what has been committed to memory but what is inborn in the very nature of things. Thus we shall penetrate its meaning not through the written text but with experience leading the way (*sed experientia praecedente penetremus*).³⁷¹

According to Abba Isaac, it is not enough to learn second hand what the Psalmist teaches.

Rather, through assiduous, repetitive reading, the monk attempts to be incorporated into

³⁷¹ Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. by Boniface Ramsey, O.P. (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1997), X.11, pp. 384-5. “quorum jugi pascuo vegetates, omnes quoque psalmorum affectus in se recipiens, ita incipiet decantare, ut eos non tamquam a Propheta compositos, sed velut a se editos, quasi orationem propriam profunda cordis compunctione depromat, vel certe ad suam personam aestimet eos fuisse directos, eorumque sententias non tunc tantummodo per Prophetam aut in Propheta fuisse completas, sed in se quotidie geri implerique cognoscat. Tunc enim Scripturae divinae nobis clarius perpatescunt, et quodammodo earum venae medullaeque panduntur, quando experientia nostra earum non tantum percipit, sed etiam praevenit notionem, sensusque verborum non per expositionem nobis, sed per documenta reserantur. Eundem namque recipientes cordis affectum quo quisque decantatus vel conscriptus est psalmus, velut auctores ejus facti, praecedemus magis intellectum ipsius, quam sequemur; id est, ut prius dictorum virtutem quam notitiam colligentes, quid in nobis gestum sit, vel quotidianis geratur incursibus, superveniente eorum meditatione quodammodo recordemur, et quid in nobis vel negligentia nostra perpererit, vel diligentia conquisierit, vel providentia divina contulerit, vel instigatio fraudaverit inimici, vel subtraxerit lubrica ac subtilis oblivio, vel intulerit humana fragilitas, seu improvida fefellerit ignoratio, decantantes reminiscamur. Omnes namque hos affectus in Psalmis invenimus expressos, ut ea quae incurrerint, velut in speculo purissimo pervidentes, efficacius agnoscamus, et ita magistrantibus effectibus [affectibus] eruditi, non ut audita, sed tamquam perfecta palpemus, nec tamquam memoriae commendata, sed velut ipsi rerum naturae insita, de interno cordis parturiamus affectu, ut eorum sensus non textu lectionis, sed experientia praecedente penetremus.” (Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 049, cols. 0838A-0839B).

the text, enabling its words and emotions to become his own and thus transform his disposition as he acquires new aptitudes for desiring God and feeling compunction.³⁷²

Abba Isaac thus described nothing less than the total re-formation of the monk's experience through his experience of the text. Reciting the Psalms, the monk translates memories of past experiences—including deeds performed, the moral conclusions drawn from these actions, and the emotions and dispositions (*affectus*) that arise from this historical existence—into scriptural terms, recontextualized and refigured as prayer. Abba Isaac goes so far as to say that the scriptural text remains unfinished until it has been “fulfilled” by its encounter with a monk's experience, even as that experience is completed by its absorption into the Psalmic world, such that the monk is instructed not by the scriptures, but by his own transformed *affectus*. The monk, then, is read by scripture as he reads it, and in this reading he becomes its author, as the biblical text becomes “his own private prayer,” emerging from the intimate depths of his own experience. The distinction between the exterior text and interior experience, the outer behavior of reading and the monk's inner motivation, is thus negated.³⁷³

Behind Cassian's theorization of reading lies Origen of Alexandria (d. ca. 254), who was a fundamental influence on Cassian's teacher, Evagrius. Origen inaugurated the Christian tradition of the allegorical reading of the Song of Songs, one that continued in Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux, and William of Saint-Thierry. In the preface to his work *Peri Archon (De Principiis)* Origen elaborates the anthropology and cosmology

³⁷² For the language of aptitudes derived from ritual repetition see Talal Asad's account of Marcel Mauss in “On Discipline and Humility in Medieval Christian Monasticism” in *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 75.

³⁷³ See Talal Asad on the problem of distinguishing between inner motivation and ritual behavior in Benedictine monasticism in *Genealogies*, p. 63.

behind his understanding of interpretive work. He argues that there is a Rule of Faith handed down from the Apostles, dealing with the essentials of correct faith, without which one could fall into heresy.³⁷⁴ However, he acknowledges that much contained in scripture is not addressed by the Rule of Faith and was presented in an obscure fashion by the divine will, in order the exegete might have material upon which to exercise (*exercitium*) his or her mind (*DP*, Bk.1.Preface, 3). As with Isaac's reader, the end of such exercise, however, was not simply to avoid the boredom of clarity, but to transform the entire human person.

Origen's anthropology held humans to be composed of body, soul, and spirit, though this tripartite structure was often rendered more simply as a dualism of the "outer" and the "inner" person, the corporeal and the spiritual, each of which has analogous sensory faculties (for example, *DP* Bk. III.6.7; *Comm. Sg.* Prologue. 2).³⁷⁵ This reduction was not an alteration of the first model but an assimilation of the middle term, the soul, to either the literal or the spiritual, depending on which direction it chose to turn in its moral life. The former has as its object the mortal and corruptible, while the latter perceives that which is incorporeal, immutable, and divine. According to Origen's account of creation, souls occupied themselves with perfect contemplation of the divinity in their original state of beatitude. However, growing bored, they cooled and fell into congealed and heavy bodies. Encumbered by these "coats of skin," the spiritual faculty of the inner

³⁷⁴ Origen, *On First Principles*, Being Koetschau's Text of the *De Principiis*, trans. by G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), Bk. 1. Preface, 2. Hereafter the text will be cited [*DP*] within the body of the chapter. The Latin edition cited is *Vier Bücher von den Prinzipien*, ed. Herwig Gorgemanns and Heinrich Karpp (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976).

³⁷⁵ Origen, "The Song of Songs *Commentary and Homilies*," trans. by R. P. Lawson (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1957). Hereafter cited within the body of the chapter [*Comm. Sg.*].

person is less able to “see” the divine, the vision that is the birthright of all rational souls (*DP*, Bk.1.4.1). The corporeal acts as a veil on the spiritual, blurring its contours, obscuring its image, even as the scripture is a treasure contained in the earthen vessels of language and the corporeality of the literal meaning (*DP*, Bk. IV.1.7; *Comm. Sg. Prol.* 2).

Through the *ascesis* of allegorical exegesis in which the interpreter exercises the mind upon the obscurities of the literal sense of scripture, the reader begins to lift the veil of the corporeal, not only from the literal body of the text but also from the reader’s own body, homologized to the literal sense of scripture (*DP*, IV.2.2). Allegorical reading is that interpretation that enables the literal to speak “otherwise,” revealing not the activities, desires, or plots of embodied figures, but the soul’s desire and search for God and God’s love for the soul. Allegory is a key means for the soul to turn towards God and become spiritual. Thus Origen writes in Book Four of *On First Principles*,

Each one must therefore portray (*describere*) the meaning (*intelligentiam*) of the divine writings in a threefold way upon his own soul (*anima*); that is, so that the simple (*simpliciores*) may be edified (*aedificentur*) by what we may call the body of the scriptures (*corpore scripturarum*) (for such is the name we may give to the common and literal interpretation); while those who have begun to make a little progress (*proficere*)...may be edified by the soul (*anima*) of scripture; and those who are perfect (*perfecti*)...may be edified by the spiritual law...Just as [a human being] therefore, is said to consist of body, soul, and spirit, so also does the holy scripture, which has been bestowed by the divine bounty for [humanity’s] salvation (Bk. IV.2.4).³⁷⁶

³⁷⁶“describere oportet in anima sua unumquemque divinarum intelligentiam litterarum: id est, ut simpliciores quique aedificentur ab ipso, ut ita dixerim, corpore scripturarum (sic enim appellamus communem istum et historiale intellectum); si qui vero aliquantum iam proficere coeperunt et possunt amplius aliquid intueri, ab ipsa scripturae anima aedificentur; qui vero perfecti sunt...tales a ipsa ‘spirtali lege’...aedificentur. Sicut ergo homo constare dicitur ex corpore et anima et spiritu, ita etiam sancta scriptura, quae ad hominum salutem divina largitione concessa est.”

The corpus of the exegete and the corpus of the text are thus imbricated; any operation on one is an operation on the other.

While the three senses of scripture and the constitution of the human person are homologized in *De Principiis*, the tripartite structure described as the basis for a transformative exegetical itinerary is charted elsewhere by Origen according to the pattern of the trilogy attributed to Solomon: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Each book corresponds to the three educative moments of the soul in its ascent to God. As in *De Principiis*, adepts read according to their level of advancement. Proverbs corresponds to the fleshly person who is a “beginner” on the spiritual path and must read texts that offer an edifying literal reading. Ecclesiastes, in which one discovers the truth of material reality (“all is vanity”), corresponds to the “psychic” person, one “progressing” on the spiritual path, who is neither fleshly nor spiritual. The Song of Songs is reserved for those who have passed through the *paideia* of the earlier stages, completing the purifications of the first two books, and able now to engage in the spiritual enterprise of allegorical interpretation, which delivers the soul to the state of perfection.³⁷⁷ The Song is considered dangerous because it speaks in the language of

³⁷⁷ “Wishing, therefore, to distinguish one from another those three branches of learning...the moral, the natural and the inspective, and to differentiate between them, Solomon issued them in three books, arranged in their proper order. First, in Proverbs he taught the moral science, putting rules for living into the form of short and pithy maxims...Secondly, he covered the science known as natural in Ecclesiastes...[the] inspective science likewise he has propounded in this little book...the Song of Songs...it behoves him who desires to know wisdom to begin with moral instruction, and to understand the meaning of the text: Thou hast desired Wisdom: then keep the commandments, and God will give her to thee. This then, was the reason why this master...put at the beginning of his work the Book of Proverbs....when a person has progressed in discernment and behaviour he may pass on thence to train his natural intelligence and, by distinguishing the causes and natures of things, may recognize the vanity of vanities that he must forsake, and the lasting and eternal things....And so from Proverbs he goes on to Ecclesiastes, who teaches...that all visible and corporeal things are fleeting and brittle; and surely once the seeker after wisdom has grasped that these things are so....he will surely reach out for the things

erotic love in a literal manner and could, if read with coarsened physical eyes rather than the purified eyes of the “inner” person, lead to lust and falling away from contemplative union with God (*Comm. Sg. Prol.1*). However, if read correctly, as an ascetic exercise impelled by *allegoresis*, the text will enflame the love of the heart for God and further purify the soul, as the epithalamium becomes the love song of the human soul and her divine lover.

Origen’s typology of the spiritual journey had a long afterlife, circulating with particular alacrity amongst Cistercians.³⁷⁸ It was William of Saint-Thierry (d. 1148), a Benedictine-turned-Cistercian monk and friend of Bernard, however, who most elaborately adopted Origen’s typology in his two most popular works (which circulated under Bernard’s name), *Exposition on the Song of Songs* and *The Golden Letter*, as well as *The Enigma of Faith*. It is likely, given Thomas’s extensive use of William’s work in the *vita*, that when he wrote that the *VLA* would be structured according to the three

unseen and eternal which, with spiritual meaning verily but under certain secret metaphors of love, are taught in the Song of Songs.” (*Comm. Sg. Prol.3*)

³⁷⁸ “But that carnal love [of Christ in his humanity] is worthwhile since through it sensual love is excluded, and the world is condemned and conquered. It becomes better when it is rational, and becomes perfect when it is spiritual. Actually it is rational when the reason is so strong in faith that in all things concerning Christ it strays in not even the slightest degree because of any false likeness of truth, nor by any heretical or diabolical deceit does it wander from the integrity of the sense of the Church. In the same way when speaking on its own it exercises such caution as never to exceed the proper limits of discretion by superstition or frivolity or the vehemence of a too eager spirit. This is loving God with the whole soul, as we said before. If, with the help of the Spirit, the soul attains such strength that it remains steadfast no matter what the effort or difficulty, if the fear of death itself cannot make it act unjustly, but even then it loves with the whole strength, this then is spiritual love.” Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs, vol. 1*, trans. by Kilian Walsh. [Cistercian Fathers Series 4] (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 2005). For other Cistercian adaptations of Origen’s scheme, see Benedicta Ward’s comment in William of Saint-Thierry, *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, p. 11, n. 34 and p. 11, Preface 13. Most notably, in the twentieth sermon on the Song of Songs, Bernard speaks of the *ordo caritatis* in terms of carnal, rational and spiritual love.

stages of the “beginners” (*inchoantium*), the ones “progressing” (*proficientium*), and the “perfect” (*perfectorum*), he derived his use of the Origenistic typology from William.

Although it is not possible to determine whether Thomas had access to the entirety of the *Exposition*, *The Golden Letter* and other of William’s writings, or knew only portions of them through *florilegia*, the *VLA* borrows profoundly from William’s oeuvre.³⁷⁹

Simone Roisin identified the threefold structure of spiritual ascent and hagiographical emplotment as a key characteristic of mystical hagiography. She argues that this typology is a primary means of marking the centrality of the interior life in the *VLA*, as opposed to the external miracles that drive the plots of Thomas’s first two *vitae* of women, Christina and Marie.³⁸⁰ Contesting this view of the importance of the typology, Barbara Newman argues that Thomas introduces this structural principle only to forget it and that the text is in fact constructed of loosely connected anecdotes.³⁸¹ I will argue that in adopting this typology, Thomas was not simply giving exalted terms to the

³⁷⁹ In addition to William’s terminology in the preface, Thomas’s description of Lutgard’s exchange of hearts with Christ (*VLA* I.12) is very close to the *Expositions* 94, and his description of Lutgard as a dove meditating on Christ’s wound as on the arc (*VLA* 1.3) echoes William’s description in *De contemplando Deo* 3 of Christ’s wound as the *ostium archae*. On these comparisons, as well as Thomas’s debt to Bernard and William for his image of the saint as the “bride of Christ” see Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, p. 401, n. 49, 51, 52.

³⁸⁰ Roisin, “La Méthode Hagiographique,” p. 554. She argues that Thomas’s use of these terms to organize the hagiography show his adoption, late in life, of a “mystical point of view.” While the *VCM* also uses a threefold division to describe the stages of Christina’s life—how she was nourished (*nutrita*), was educated (*educata*), and her deeds (*gesta*) (*VCM* 3)—Roisin argues that this division is chronological while Lutgard’s beginner-progressing-perfect is atemporal and thus accords with Thomas’s turn to the interior and mystical (Roisin, p. 554). However, it is not only a different temporality in play here. Christina’s division is blatantly physical, emphasizing the somatic nature of what is to follow.

³⁸¹ Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Collected Saints’ Lives*, Introduction by Barbara Newman, p. 18. She writes that, “this [threefold] structure bears less theological weight than one might think. His main organizing device is simply a loose chronology, aided by the clustering of thematically related anecdotes... Thomas has a religious agenda, but it is to be found more in his individual anecdotes than in any ambitious theological scheme imposed on his material.”

discrete stages of childhood, adolescence, and old age. Nor does the typology serve only to describe Lutgard's transition from the Benedictine to Cistercian orders and the perfection she realized, according to Thomas, eleven years before her death, in her dying, and after her death (*VLA*, Pr). Nor was he supplying an organizational schema for a random collection of anecdotes. Rather, the typology marks the *vita* from the outset as a text concerned with *ways of reading and inhabiting a monastic practice*, reading that is performed by and realized in the soul *and* the body.

As we have just seen, the spiritual stages of ascent derive from the Origenistic tradition of reading scripture in a threefold manner, such that each stage of the exegete's soul—a soul that is inextricably tied to the state of the body—corresponds to the type of reading undertaken. Reading enables the soul's progressive transformation. Thus, Lutgard's seemingly contradictory relation to language, so central a concern of the *vita*, cannot be understood apart from this governing Origenistic-Thierrian pattern and the readerly practice it implies.

In what follows, I will outline William's understanding of the threefold ascent of the soul according to his *Exposition on the Song of Songs*. William adapts this typology in other works, namely *The Golden Epistle* and *The Engima of Faith*. However, as the *VLA* could be understood to be yet another commentary on the Song of Songs, in which Thomas figures Lutgard as the soul becoming Christ's bride, the *Exposition* seems the most appropriate place to consider William's theological psychology. I will then address Barbara Newman's contention that the *Life* is structured as a series of random anecdotes organized loosely around particular themes, holding instead that Thomas's narrativization of Lutgard's *Life* is essential to his construction of her as a bride and as a reader, and that

this narrativization follows the typology he offers in the Prologue. Finally, I will consider how this typology relates to the *vita*'s conception of reading.

William of Saint-Thierry and the Three States of Prayer

William adapts Origen's schema in the *Exposition* to describe the three states of those who pray (*orantium*). The states (*status*) refer to the kind of person praying as well as to the kind of prayer offered. He names these the animal, rational, and spiritual (*animalem, rationalem, spiritualem*).³⁸² While this terminology differs from Thomas's, his terms basically accord with those found in *The Golden Letter*, where William writes of beginners, (*incipientium*), those making progress (*proficientium*), and the perfect (*perfectorum*). The vocabulary of *The Golden Letter* aligns with that of the *Exposition*, however, when he writes that the state of beginners may be called "animal" (*animalis*) the state of those who are making progress "rational" (*rationalis*) and the state of the perfect "spiritual" (*spiritualis*).³⁸³

The *Exposition* opens with a statement of basic anthropological principle, namely, that the human person was created *ad imaginem et similitudinem* (*Exp. Sg. Pf. 1*).

According to William, to be in the image of something is to participate in it, to have

³⁸² The Latin edition is *Exposé sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, ed. J.-M. Déchanet, O.S.B. *Sources Chrétiennes*, no. 82 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1998). English translation from William of St. Thierry, "Exposition on the Song of Songs" in *The Works of William of St. Thierry vol. 2*. Trans. by Mother Columba Hart, OSB. [Cistercian Fathers Series 6]. (Cistercian Publications: Spencer MA, 1970). Preface, 13. Hereafter cited within the body of the chapter [*Exp. Sg.*].

³⁸³ Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, *Lettre aux Frères du Mont-Dieu (Lettre d'or)*. In *Sources Chrétiennes*, no. 223. Ed. Jean Déchanet (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1976) §41. English translation by Theodore Berkeley OCSO. *The Golden Epistle: A Letter to the Brethren at Mont-Dieu*. (Cistercian Publications: Kalamazoo, 1980).

reality by virtue of that relation. Participation in the image is the birthright of all humans, and it is that original sharing in the divine nature makes possible the human search for God. The likeness is the perfecting activity of divinity in the daily practices of life. While both image and likeness have been damaged by sin, likeness suffers the more serious injury.³⁸⁴

The three stages of life refer to the progression of the soul in its quest to purify the image and likeness in order to reach the “fruition” (*fruendum*) of God in the face-to-face vision after death. This vision is inextricably wed to the state of the soul, for “as the one who prays is, so the God to whom he prays appears to him” (*Exp. Sg.* 13). A reciprocity exists between the similitude and its vision, for “no one who contemplates you reaches fruition of you save insofar as he becomes like to you” (*nemo usque ad fruendum contemplatur, nisi in quantum similis tibi efficitur*) (*Exp. Sg.* I).

The prayer of the animal state is more complex than it initially appears. At first, William attributes the category to those who ask something of God apart from God’s own self, such as prosperity or prudence, but not a clean conscience (*Exp. Sg.* 14). Such prayer, he argues, “finds no acceptance in the song of love,” for the bride singularly desires the presence of the groom. Such animal persons must clothe God in a human form (*secundum formam humanam*) (*Exp. Sg.*, 16). The animal person lacks understanding of divinity and “the God to whom he prays is ever in the dark cloud” (*Exp. Sg.*, 14). However, William asserts that the simplicity of the animal soul, if “religious” (meaning that he or she prays to the *human* Jesus with much devotion), though dominated by bodily concerns and conceiving of God in corporeal terms, can arrive through these “bodily

³⁸⁴ See Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, v. 2: *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 229.

imaginings...without knowing how, at understanding certain mysteries of piety.... For he loves much, and therefore much is granted him..." (*Exp. Sg.*, 16).³⁸⁵ Saints, too, may perform a kind of animal prayer when asking for help for this world, but their petitions are offered with true piety (*Exp. Sg.* 15).

William derives the biblical warrant for the rational state by referencing the Ascension of Jesus, who departed from the view of his disciples so that the Holy Spirit would descend on them (*Exp. Sg.*, 17). Likewise, the rational seeker must dispel all images and seek God "beneath the mask of many faces,"³⁸⁶ for "as long as he who prays thinks of anything bodily in him to whom he prays, his prayer is indeed devout, but not entirely spiritual" (*Exp. Sg.*, 17).³⁸⁷ Here, the good will of the animal stage, which desires God without comprehension, sees with understanding (*intellectum*) and finds fruition in love (*amorem*) (*Exp. Sg.*, 19).

The spiritual state is the most elusive of the three. The fruition sought in the spiritual life—the face-to-face vision of God that is the prayer of the perfect—is not possible while in the body:

Now [one] cannot see God's face and live, cannot, that is, attain in this life full knowledge of him (*plenam ejus cognitionem in hac vita apprehendere*). God, then, in his divine greatness, places in the understanding of his lover and entrusts to him a certain quasi-knowledge (*effigiem*) of himself—consisting not in an imaginary phantasm (*praesumpti phantasmatis*), but in a certain devout affection (*affectionis*),

³⁸⁵ ...modo quodam sibimet incognito, de imaginationibus ipsis corporesi, quaedam sibi concipiens sacramenta pietatis...Diliget enim multum, et ideo praestatur, veil dimittitur ei multum.

³⁸⁶ Ex multarum personis facierum.

³⁸⁷ Quia quamdiu ab orante, in eo quem orat, corporeum quid cogitatur, pie quidem, sed non omnino spiritualiter oratur.

which a [person] yet living in the flesh is able to grasp and endure” (*Exp. Sg.*, 20).³⁸⁸

While this affection given by grace (in contrast to a corporeal image of the divinity) is not the fruition of the beatific vision, it is the mark of the spiritual state on earth, a state towards which the rational person always tends. A person is rational “insofar as he is guided to his goal by reason” and spiritual “in the measure of his attainment once he has attained it” (*Exp. Sg.*, 22). This attainment, however, is not absolute. As arrival must wait for death, the rational and spiritual stages engage in a continual oscillation:

While this [one] is working out his purification, he is rational; but when he is purified, he is spiritual. But as the rational state (*statum*) should always progress (*proficere*) toward the spiritual, so the spiritual state must sometimes revert to the rational. That a spiritual [person] should always act spiritually is something never to be attained in this life; nevertheless the [person] of God should always be either rational in what he seeks or spiritual in what he loves (*Exp. Sg.*, 23).³⁸⁹

Furthermore, even the carnal images of the animal state may, if directed correctly, obtain in the rational state (*Exp. Sg.*, 23); the rational soul may still use and encounter God through the use of images.

While these states are in some sense discrete, progressing according to the logic of increasing perfection, we see that the lines between them are imperfectly drawn. Even the saints partake of all three types of prayer, and the spiritual state is attained only intermittently in this life. The one who seeks wisdom continuously moves among these

³⁸⁸ Et quoniam non potest homo faciem ejus videre et vivere, hoc est plenam ejus cognitionem in hac vita apprehendere, collocat in sensu amantis, et commendat aliquam cognitionis suae effigiem, non praesumpti phantasmatis, sed piaie cujusdam affectionis; quam vivens adhuc in carne, capere posit homo vel sustinere.

³⁸⁹ Hic, ut dictum est, quamdiu purgatur, rationalis est; purgatus autem jam spiritualis est. Sed sicut expedit rationalem statum semper in spirituale proficere, sic necesse est spirituale nonnumquam in rationalem redire. Semper quidem spirituale spiritualiter agi, non hujus vitae est; semper tamen debet esse homo Dei, vel rationalis in appetitu, vel spiritualis in affectu.

stages, and arrival at the spiritual state is deferred until death. Thus, while the word *status* implies “static,” derived from the Latin *stare* “to stand,” referring to physical attitude, social standing, as well as the “characteristic mark” of a thing, the middle term (*proficientes*)—those progressing from the beginner toward the spiritual state—implies continual movement, one that moves between the poles of the spiritual itinerary.

The Song’s drama of the bride and bridegroom, consisting of the fluctuations of presence and absence between the lover and beloved, the bride’s abandonment and subsequent search for the groom, offers the best way to understand the temporal relation between the three states in the context of the *Exposition*. The suspensions, twists, and reversals of the plot serve to subvert notions of either static occupation of a single stage or a temporal progress that moves solely forward, even as a notion of progress as increasing perfection—a perfecting that occurs as the rational soul completes the lessons and purifications of the animal stage, enabling it to move into the spiritual stage—is posited by the typology.

The oscillation in the Song is the meaning of the “wound” of charity, a love that renders the absence of the lover visible and painful. Déchanet notes that William distinguishes four acts in the song: incitement to love, purgation, the repose, and the epithalamium, each of which “revert[s] to an identical scenario, but in a higher key than before.”³⁹⁰ The progress thus proceeds as a spiral rather than a straight line, as each consummation reverts to distance, inciting the desiring soul to seek the next moment of union. In each song (although William only completed commentary on two), the bride and groom enjoy a mutual repose. However, the drama of each song is constituted by the

³⁹⁰ William of Saint-Thierry, *On the Song of Songs*, Introduction by J.M. Déchanet, p. xiv.

bride's abandonment and subsequent search for the groom, a search that William understands to be a process of purgation (*Exp. Sg.* 10). Thus, in the prelude to the first song, William writes that the "argument" of the first song is this structure of desire incited by a connection that leads to absence. The bride, he writes, was brought into the groom's storerooms after her initial conversion from the animal to the rational stage and there learned many things about him and herself, receiving gifts of perfume as well as his favor, all of which acted as an "incitement to love" (*irritamen amoris*). However, following this wooing, he "went forth and withdrew" in order that "she might be trained (*exercendum*) and purified (*purgandam*) but not utterly abandoned (*deserendam*)...and thereupon she was wounded by charity, enkindled with desire of him who was absent (*desiderio absentis aestuans*) drawn by the charm of a holy newness (*sanctae novitatis suavitate affecta*)...she is cast aside and left to herself" (*destituta ac derelicta*) (*Exp. Sg.* 29).³⁹¹ In this first contact, the bride was given an intimation of fruition with a kiss at her conversion, but did not yet recline in the mutual repose that will occur when the bride acts in co-operation with her divine lover, following her purgation.³⁹²

In the second song, distance is figured by William as the separation from heaven demanded by the mortal life and the impossibility of sustaining contemplation while in the body. The bride is sent from "contemplation (*contemplatione*) of the bridegroom's

³⁹¹ "In cellaria ergo introducta Sponsa, multa de Sponso, multa didicit de seipsa. Ubi quaecumque ei collata sunt, primo accessu ad Sponsam, irritamen amoris...Deine vero actus eam excipit purgatorius, exercendam, purgandam, non usquequaque deserendam. Egresso enim et abeunte Sponso, vulnerata caritate, desiderio absentis aestuans, sanctae novitatis suavitate affecta, gustu bono innovata, et repente destituta ac derelicta sibi."

³⁹² McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, p. 242.

riches to the house of her poverty” (*Exp. Sg.* 146), the flesh.³⁹³ While the starting point of the second song is the bride’s return from a state of ecstasy, and thus begins, as Déchanet notes, in a higher key than the initial incitements to love in the first song, both songs share the same structure, a movement of “desire becom[ing] a crucifixion” (*cruciante desiderio*) (*Exp. Sg.* 146) and the temporary relief from grief through union.

It would seem, then, that the three stages of prayer correspond to William’s understanding of the plot of purification, one that proceeds through advance, retreat, and repetition, while the pain occasioned by this deferral is punctuated by interludes of repose or union. It is the very agony of these postponements and the momentary suspensions of this pain that maps the plot of the Song; it is the shape of desire, and the means of purification. This plot belongs not only to the bride and bridegroom of the text but also to the reader of the Song. In performing the *askesis* of allegory, the exegete’s own soul becomes the bride, undergoing the same incitement, crucifixion, and purgation of desire. “The meaning (*intelligentiam*)” of the Song is, as Origen wrote, “portrayed (*describere*) in a threefold way upon [the exegete’s] own soul” (*DP Bk. IV.2.4*), so that even as the carnality of the literal level of the Song reveals the spiritual, so the exegete’s carnal desire is purged and redirected towards its heavenly bridegroom. An allegorical operation upon the text becomes an operation upon the exegete’s own soul and body.

William introduces the *Exposition* with an account of allegorical reading in the Origenist and Bernardine tradition. The ideal reader, according to William, is a performer, one who inhabits the role of the bride by taking up her script so completely

³⁹³ “Citius remittitur in domum paupertatis suae, a contemplatione divitiarum Sponsi.”

that the text is given a second life as the reader-performer enters conversation with the divine lover (*Exp. Sg.*, 3). He writes,

[W]e beseech you, O Holy Spirit, that we may be filled, O Love, with your love, in order to understand (*ad intelligendum*) the canticle of love. Thus may we also become in some measure participants (*efficiamur participes*) in the holy conversation of Bridegroom and Bride, that what we read may take effect in us (*ut agatur in nobis quod legitur a nobis*) (*Exp. Sg.*, 4).³⁹⁴

This passage has been noted by other commentators to be an exceptionally strong statement of the performative knowledge granted by a particular kind of devotional reading. Ineke van 'T Spijker translates *agatur in nobis* as “may be performed in us.” The reader, she argues, becomes the “scene of the drama,” compelled by his reading to turn inward and “when he finds these stages [the threefold division of the spiritual life] recognize them in himself.” Van 'T Spijker's notion of the performance of the bride and groom occurring within the exegete is drawn from her further argument that William's use of *intelligendum* here could be drawing on the classical etymology of *intellectus*, which is *intus legere*, or as William glossed it in his work, *Speculum Fidei*, “when he who believes reads in the affect of his heart what he believes.”³⁹⁵

In this notion of the text as a site of self-recognition as well as a drama in which the reader becomes a participant in the story, William rearticulates Cassian's notion of Psalmic reading, in which “[t]he meaning of the words comes through to us not just by way of commentaries but by what we ourselves have gone through” and “brought to birth

³⁹⁴ [S]ancte Spiritus, te invocamus, ut amore tuo repleamur, o amor, ad intelligendum canticum amoris; ut et nos colloqui sancti Sponsi et Sponsae, aliquatenus efficiamur participes; ut agatur in nobis quod legitur a nobis.

³⁹⁵ Ineke van 'T Spijker, *Fictions of the Inner Life: Religious Literature and Formation of the Self in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), p. 209. Bernard McGinn also notes the etymology of *intus legere* in *The Growth of Mysticism*, p. 230.

in the depths of our hearts” as though “a part of our being.”³⁹⁶ Taken up in faith and ruminated upon, the understanding (*intelligendum*) of the text comes about by its inscription on the heart through a devoted reading such that the reader is eventually able to “read within” the conversation of the bride and bridegroom, their drama of love having become the reader’s own.

William’s account of reading and understanding is dominated by the term *affectus*. For monastic authors like Cassian and William, the term captures the curious relation between activity and passivity, practice and grace, in the human relation with divinity. The monastic understanding of cultivated passivity complicates the gendering of literacy as male. Derived from the verb *afficio* (*adficio*), which means to exert influence on the mind or body of another, even to afflict another, the passive participle *affectus*, which often means, simply, love, arises from God’s action upon the heart (*afficio*), which produces the human *affectus*. Human love thus emerges from divine initiative. Divine activity effects a change in the human subject, rendering him or her receptive to God’s transformations even as such receptivity is carefully cultivated by the monk, in the case we are considering, through practices of reading. As Amy Hollywood notes, the “acquisition of proper spiritual dispositions through habit is itself the operation of the freely given grace that is God’s love.”³⁹⁷

According to William, the transformation of the monk’s affect by divine affection is necessary for understanding the Song, for the Canticle teaches love, and “where affections are concerned, only persons possessing like affections can readily understand

³⁹⁶ Cassian, *Conferences* X.11, p. 137.

³⁹⁷ Amy Hollywood, “Spiritual but not Religious,” p. 23.

what is said” (*Ubi enim de affectibus agitur, non facile, nisi a similiter affectis, capitur quod dicitur*) (*Exp. Sg.*, 4). The text remains “uncaptured” by the understanding if the affect of the reader is not a full participant, enabling the reader to *experience* the text within his or her disposition, being affected by it and, through it, God. So the activity of understanding requires the reader’s passivity, which allows the divine action to transform him or her, turning the reader, as William puts it, into a “God-affected person” (*homo Deo affectus*) (*Exp. Sg.* 94). The central place given to passivity (which arises, paradoxically, by means of a *cultivated* abasement), is perhaps another reason for the Cistercian counter-cultural gendering of literacy as feminine, for the monk attains to a stance of bridal humility, desire, and knowledge through a mode of reading figured as an expression of “humble love” (*humilis amor*) (*Exp. Sg.* 94).

Thus, for William, to know is to be “affected.”³⁹⁸ To be “literate” in this view—though this is not a term William uses—would be the capacity to set the text to work within the reader such that it is understood by being “read within” the experiencing heart. Such a transformation of the person by means of inhabiting textual space, becoming the scene where its drama is enacted, ultimately effects the transformation of the resemblance (*similitudo*) of the soul, so that it may undergo its purgative migration and move through

³⁹⁸ Our contemporary understanding of the term “affected” is in direct contradistinction to the medieval. This difference points to the difficulty of explaining the complexity of passivity and activity, inner and outer, in the monastic notion of practice. To a contemporary ear, to be affected is to simulate something that is not indicative of the true state of one’s inner life. It is a kind of docetism in which the subject is dressed in the clothes of something that is other than him or herself. In contrast, the medieval notion of being affected, though it likewise indicates the action of an agent upon a recipient, does not indicate a counterfeit subjectivity, but is understood to be, in the monastic context, the ideal to which the monk aspires. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 68.

the stages of the spiritual life.³⁹⁹ The further the soul turns “in humble love” (*humilis amor*) towards its source, the more it is “conformed” (*conformatur*) to that source, a growth in resemblance that ultimately moves towards the unity of spirit (*unitas spiritus*): “When a person is made to the likeness of the Maker, he or she becomes a ‘god-affected’ person, that is becomes one spirit with God, beautiful in Beauty, good in the Good. Such a one...exists in God through grace as what God is by nature.” (*Cumque efficitur ad similitudinem facientis, fit homo Deo affectus; hoc est cum Deo unus spiritu; pulcher in pulchro, bonus in bono...existens in Deo per gratiam, quod ille est per naturam*) (*Exp. Sg. 94*).⁴⁰⁰

Plotting the VLA: Thomas of Cantimpré and the Monastic Model of Reading

Thomas’s foregrounding of the typology of the threefold ascent of the soul in the Prologue of the *VLA* situates the *vita* in the monastic lineage beginning with Origen. It sounds the first note of the bridal mysticism of the *vita*, introducing Lutgard not only as a figure for the bride of the Song, but also for the exegete whose textual practices seek for the text to “be performed” within her. The emplotment of the *vita*, I argue, is a key means for Thomas’s assimilation of Lutgard’s narrative to that of the Song of Songs and her desire for God to that of the bride.

Yet the *Life* contains a multiplicity of plot structures. The first is that posited by the Prologue and repeated in II.43, of the threefold ascent of the soul as it moves from animal to rational to spiritual stage, a model Thomas suggests will determine the content

³⁹⁹ Odo Brooke, *Studies in Monastic Theology*, p. 24.

⁴⁰⁰ This translation is from Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, p. 231.

of each of *vita*'s three books. A second plot is the temporally determined progression of childhood, adolescence, and old age. A third tracks her movement from early life with her family to a Benedictine monastery, her transition to the Cistercian monastery at Aywières, and finally her last years and death. However, these organizing devices, despite their shared tripartite structure, imperfectly map onto each other: Lutgard experiences the union with God reserved for the spiritual stage at a precociously early age and before undergoing the purgative process (in I.12), a union from which she retreats. She becomes a Cistercian at age twenty-four, in which situation she will be both "progressing" and for her final eleven years, perfect. Thomas will also sometimes compress the entire plot of the three stages of the soul into a single passage, as he does in I.12.

Broadly speaking, the three books of the *vita* are structured according to the progress of the soul outlined by the Prologue's typology and its allegorical elaboration in the terms of the Song as suggested by William. Thus in Book One—which contains her childhood, adolescence, conversion, novitiate, and consecration as a Benedictine—§I.1-7 concerns the animal stage, addressing Lutgard's life in the "world," including her father's desire that she make a suitable marriage, her love for a young man (I.2), and her survival of an attempted rape (I.5). The remaining passages of Book One, following her entrance to the Benedictine order, represent her beginning to make progress, and "[u]pon returning to her monastery," exulting in her progress (*proficiens*) (I.7). The later chapters primarily document her visions of the human Jesus (I.12; I.13; I.14; I.19; I.21) and other saints who offer her comfort and confirm her calling (I.8; I.9; I.15), as well as miracles in which she manifests her holiness to the community (the sun descends on her at night (I.11); she is

suspended in the air (I.10), and is miraculously crowned (1.17). At the end of Book One, Lutgard moves to the Cistercian order.

Book Two, opening as it does with the dramatic verb *transeundo* (the technical word for the translation of relics in canonization ceremonies), marks a shift to the purgative work of the progressing soul bereft of the bridegroom, who in this loneliness learns the virtues, practices penance, and experiences fear. The language of love, so dominant in Book One, all but disappears. Instead of the visions of light and consolation that mark the first book, her visions are of the dead and the demonic. Lutgard's own purification is mirrored by her efforts to purge others as she takes up her role as healer and intercessor for those in purgatory. No less than twenty passages involve her intercessory work. She performs two seven-year fasts, one of them initiated after the Virgin comes to her distressed by the "cruelty" of the Albigensians, the other performed for the sake of sinners. In §21 she undergoes a "martyrdom" in which a blood vessel bursts in her chest, making her a second Agnes. A spying priest witnesses her spattered with blood while she ecstatically meditates on the Passion (II.23). There are two instances of female scrupulosity in this book where, despite her advanced state, Lutgard, debilitated by fear for her soul, seeks reassurance (§5 and §17).

In Book Three, Lutgard is further stripped of all extraneous comforts and privileges (signified most powerfully by blindness), and despises this world in which she feels trapped, unable to sustain the contemplation and union that she desires. Finally, she enters the full fruition of union in death.

Broadly speaking, then, we see in the three books the progress of the soul outlined by the typology offered in the preface and its allegorical elaboration in the terms of the

Song as suggested by William. However, while this description of the *vita* suggests a fairly linear emplotment governed by William's typology, closer examination reveals multiple reversals and prolepses within the narrative. I argue that the mixture of stages—whether animal, rational, and spiritual or penitent, ascetic, and contemplative—are not evidence of an anecdotal structure dominating the *vita*, but of the oscillations of the plot of the Song that mark the incitement and crucifixion of desire in commentaries such as that of William. Furthermore, rather than disappear after its provocative appearance in the prologue, Thomas subtly rearticulates this typology in I.12 (which I address later in this chapter) and again in II.43, to which I now turn.

While Thomas's allegorization of Lutgard's life in II.43 echoes William's erotic language, it transposes the allegory into the vocabulary of struggle. This shift further nuances the *vita*'s structure, complicating the linearity that it at first seems to promise. The chapter discusses "[h]ow she lived in a triple state: that is, how she lay in the triple bed of the Song of Songs." The first "bed" is the penance of the beginner where the soul lies wounded. In the second, the progressing soul battles until it becomes tired. In the third, the soul lies in enjoyment in the contemplative life of the perfect. The beginner cleanses her conscience with tears. The progressing soul undertakes ascetic practice, defeating the flesh and Satan, while the perfect soul enjoys equality with divinity, absorbed and "translated" (as Lutgard was translated into the Cistercian order at the end of Book Two) into the godhead, an absorption Thomas describes with the Bernadine image of the drop of water in a cask of wine.

While penance characterizes the first book, ascetic discipline the second, and contemplation and union in death the third, frequent inconsistencies crop up. For

instance, contemplation appears in the purgative stage (for example, in II.1, Lutgard “rest[ed] in the sleep of contemplation” and in II.23, she is “rapt in contemplation”). In Book Two, the ascetic stage, Lutgard weeps penitential tears (II.17) and Christ appears in bodily form (II.6), even though, according to a strict interpretation of the typology, such somatic activities should remain in the first book. Finally, Lutgard continues ascetic purgation in the final moments of her life, despite her state of perfection (III.4; III.9).

The allegory of the Song in II.43 enables a reader to look back on Book One and glimpse the perfection of union in Lutgard’s early life. She is described with bridal language in Book One: as William’s heroine, she is said to “perfectly follow Christ the lamb” (I.18; *Exp. Sg.* 46); oil drips from her hands like the bride of the Sg. 5:5 while she experiences the spiritual drunkenness of the perfect:

Squeezing [her hands] she said, “Look, sister, how the Almighty deals with me!... Saying this as if she were drunk—and indeed she was drunk—she danced around the reclusorium with wondrous gestures. What is so marvelous about this? Invited by the bridegroom, she had been ‘led into the wine-cellar.’ Afterward, like one beloved (*cara*), she ate the bread of penance with toil; then like one more beloved (*carior*) she drank the abundance of his grace; and finally like one most beloved (*carissima*) she became drunk and was filled with exceeding and ineffable joy and with a spirit of folly (*modum excedens desipientium spiritu ineffabiliter laetabatur*)”⁴⁰¹ (I.16).⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ There is a discrepancy between Margot King’s (*The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1991) and Barbara Newman’s (*Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints’ Lives*) translations of this passage. While King, whose version I use here, translates the “postquam” as “afterward” referring to a time after an initial state of drunkenness, such that after her first drunken state, Lutgard *then* eats the bread of penance, etc., Newman, on the other hand, understands the commentary following the “postquam” to be a gloss of the experience of the oil and Lutgard’s drunken state, and thus has her drunkenness occur after she has performed the requisite penitential acts: “After she had eaten the bread of penance with toil, like one beloved, and drunk the abundance of his grace, like one more beloved, at last she became drunk, like one most beloved.” However, Lutgard has not yet undergone any significant penitential experiences in the *vita*, nor has she truly experienced the progressing states of one *carior*. King’s translation thus better represents William of Saint-Thierry’s understanding of the bride’s stages in which the bride is invited to the groom’s wine cellar, becomes drunk, then returns to the toil of penance in his absence, until finally she returns to her drunken state, yet in a higher key.

This passage makes clear that despite experiencing the ecstatic drunkenness of a mystical adept who is “most beloved,” in Book One Lutgard has not yet arrived at the final contemplative stage; rather, this early encounter contains the seed of its later fruition. In fact, according to the logic of the Song, Lutgard’s experience of being “most beloved” (*carissima*)—the third and most perfect degree of love—in the wine cellar of the groom is necessary for the subsequent drama of purgation, impelled as it is by the bride’s removal from that place of ecstasy.

Book Three foregrounds the oscillation between distance and union by which the purgations of the rational stage occur, as the book is driven primarily by her desire to die: “From her ardent yearning to see Christ, she had developed a fixed idea that she should pass over (*transire*) to the Lord at that time” (III.9). The day of her death is the reference point by which all events in the book are timed. The book contains her predictions of her own death (III.6; III.9; III.12; III.13; III.16), visions that both help her prepare for death (III.1; III.3; III.11), as well as visions that tell her death is not yet at hand (III.9). Thus her earthly life is narrated against the horizon of death, an event that throws the present into relief as a place of lack and longing.

These mixtures of stages—whether animal, rational, and spiritual or penitent, ascetic, and contemplative—I would argue, are not, as Newman argues, evidence of an anecdotal structure dominating the *vita* but of the fluidity of the emplotment of the Song following commentaries such as William’s. As we have seen, Thomas periodically refers

⁴⁰² “a sponso enim introducta in cellam vinariam, invitata erat; & postquam, ut cara, comedit, id est, cum labore edit poenitentiae panem; & ut carior, bibit abundantium gratiarum; tandem, sicut carissima, inebriata est; & ideo modum excedens desipientium spiritu ineffabiliter laetabatur.”

back to the principle of the three stages, which roughly govern the arc of the work, even as he allows departures from their strict delineations appropriate to the narrativization of bridal purgation.

Illiteracy in the *VLA*

I have argued that Thomas's emplotment of the *life* implicitly aligns Lutgard with the figure of the bride. As we have seen, assimilation to the bride in monastic practice typically occurs through the discipline of reading. Thomas, however, makes extensive use of the illiteracy *topos* in order to represent Lutgard's sanctity. I will argue that he deploys the *topos* in ways that ultimately serve to transvalue the category of illiteracy such that it becomes a way to describe the Cistercian notion of literacy as feminine insofar as it entails the cultivation of humble passivity.

Lutgard calls herself *laica monialis* four times in the second book. The *vita*'s seventeenth-century editor, Henschen, notes that this epithet does not mean that she was a laywoman or *conversa*. Instead, the phrase contrasts her educational status with other figures in the *vita*, such as the *magis literata* Sybille de Gages.⁴⁰³ The circumstances in which Lutgard described herself as *laica monialis* follow a similar pattern: she heard a divine voice quoting scripture, which she, as an "unlettered nun," did not understand until it was "interpreted" by a human interlocutor. This pattern stands in contrast to those visions—whether of saints (St. Catherine, I.9), sinners (Innocent III, 2.8), or the godhead (I.15)—which Lutgard understood and reported directly without interpretative assistance

⁴⁰³ See Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Collected Saints' Lives*, p. 226, n. 62. The epithet *magis litterata* occurs in III.12. The episode in which this occurs follows the same pattern as those in book two where *laica moniale* is used, thus giving further evidence for Henschen's interpretation.

(II.8). It is not, then, the visionary element that baffled Lutgard, but specifically the quotation of scriptural passages: it is to these latter experiences that Thomas refers in his use of the epithet *laica*.

The first episode occurs in II.8. Lutgard was grieving the death of John of Liroux, who had been en route to Rome to plead the cause of the *mulieres religiosae* of Brabant. John appeared to her in clothing signifying the “perfection of the spiritual life.” Lutgard, however, was still grieving his loss when the divine voice spoke to her in the words of I Samuel I.8: “Am I not more precious to you than ten sons?” Lutgard did not understand, but when she “heard them interpreted,” her grief dissolved (*Hæc igitur, sicut Laica Monialis, cum non intelligeret, interpretata audisset, non ultra defunctum luxit*).

An episode in II.10 involves the issue of discretion. Lutgard was praying for a nun who received revelations that seemed divine but were in fact satanic. She heard God tell her to “Illumine those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (Luke 1.79). As an “unlettered nun” (*laica*) she did not understand (*non intelligeret*) but sought out another nun for clarification. She was then able to free the deceived visionary and thus becomes one who “illuminated many others who sat in darkness by the example of her behavior.” In short, she lived out the instruction contained in the biblical injunction.

In a third episode (II.20), Lutgard prayed for the assistance of a nun, Elisabeth, who, though needing to constantly eat, was too weak to stand. Lutgard heard the enigmatic words, “Arise, arise, daughter of Jerusalem and life of the chalice of his wrath which you have drunk at the hand of the Lord” (Is. 51:17). Lutgard asked the *litteratis Monialibus* what this means, and they replied that Elisabeth would soon become well.

In the final example of this pattern (II.33), the motif is elaborated in significant ways. Lutgard had a desire to do a good deed for a “poor little woman.” “In her spirit” she heard, “[i]n the psalm you read and say to me ‘O Lord, my portion, I have said I would keep your law’ (Ps.118:57). This is how you should understand it: I am your portion, you have nothing else. So then, you should respond to the needy woman, Gold and silver I have none, but what I have I give you’ (Acts 3:6). If you pray for her, you will have given her what is yours. You will have kept my law.”

In this instance, rather than turn to a human source for interpretation of the scripture, Jesus himself told Lutgard its meaning and application. Lutgard went to Sybille de Gages who looked up the gloss for Psalm 118:57 and discovered that “the Lord’s response to Lutgard accorded exactly with the gloss.” Thomas takes this to mean that the scriptures “are expounded by the same Spirit by which they were composed.” In contrast with previous cases, in which Lutgard’s message was delivered to those able to make it intelligible in terms of the situation at hand, Lutgard’s vision confirmed the accuracy and authority of the gloss, even as the gloss confirmed her vision. Thomas underscores the miraculous nature (and thus authority) of this confirmation by placing it in relief with the previous series of events, which emphasized her “illiteracy.”

In the first three episodes, Lutgard received her understanding from other humans, while in the fourth, divine interpretive intervention was appended to the vision proper. These are not, then, instances of divinely infused knowledge occurring in a moment of ecstasy; the vision and its interpretation occur in discrete moments and Lutgard attains understanding through an act of interpretation. Despite their divine impetus, the episodes are mundane: interpretation of the divine oracle is rendered in language anyone can

understand, and this understanding applies in immediate ways to the situation at hand. As such, the purpose of these tales is not to foreground Lutgard's illiteracy but to emphasize the necessity of interpretation of scripture, learnedness, and its possible overcoming by divine intervention. Lutgard received divine messages and relayed them to other women. Her reception of the divine message does not, on its own, amount to understanding or "illumination."

These representations of Lutgard's illiteracy underscore the necessity of interpreting both visions and scripture. In representing Lutgard as reliant on others for the interpretation of her visions, Thomas buttresses his treatment of the *VLA* as a rhetorical document that is effective only by means of the work of reading and interpretation. Furthermore, Lutgard's illiteracy is a *topos* used to demonstrate her exemplary humility.

Augustine opens the *De Doctrina Christiana* with the observation that some readers object to following the rules governing the interpretation of scripture, for they believe that "everything rightly done towards clearing up the obscurities of Scripture could be better done by the unassisted grace of God" (Pf. ii).⁴⁰⁴ According to Augustine, such persons are bloated with pride, equating themselves with Antony or the slave Christianus, who learned to read simply through prayer (Pf. iv). Augustine counsels such people to "put away false pride and learn whatever can be learnt from man; and let him who teaches another communicate what he has himself received without arrogance and without jealousy" (Pf. v). Augustine's exhortation suggests a distinction between visionary immediacy, in which one hears words that "are not lawful for man to utter" (2

⁴⁰⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching [De Doctrina Christiana]*, trans. by R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Hereafter referred as *DDC* and cited within the body of the text.

Cor. 12:4), and the slow progress of learning through preaching and reading. Those who would purposefully avoid interpretation (which requires such things as the acquisition of other languages and knowledge of rhetoric) in the hope of achieving the ease of ecstasy are doomed to fail.

Despite his status as exemplary ecstatic, Paul is offered by Augustine as an example of the ideal reader and interpreter, a humble man whose visionary experience does not preclude a willingness to be instructed by others.

Let us beware of such arrogant and dangerous temptations, and rather reflect that the apostle Paul, no less, though prostrated and then enlightened by a divine voice from heaven, was sent to a human being to receive the sacrament of baptism and be joined to the church...All this could certainly have been done through an angel, but the human condition would be really forlorn if God appeared unwilling to minister his word to human beings through human agency. It has been said, "For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are": how could that be true if God did not make divine utterances from his human temple but broadcast direct from heaven or through angels the learning that he wished to be passed on to mankind? Moreover, there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were intermingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other humans. And, to be sure, the eunuch who was reading the prophet Isaiah but could not understand him was not sent by an angel to the apostle; nor was the passage that he could not understand explained to him by an angel or divinely revealed within his mind without human assistance. In fact Philip, who knew the prophet Isaiah, was sent to him by divine prompting and sat with him, revealing in human words and human language the passage of scripture that had been meaningless to him. (Preface, 12-14).⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁵ "Caveamus tales temptations superbissimas et periculosissimas magisque cogitemus et ipsum apostolum Paulum, licet divina et caelesti voce prostratum et instructum, ad hominem tamen missum esse ut sacramenta perciperet atque copularetur ecclesiae...Et poterant utique omnia per angelum fieri, sed abiecta esset humana condicio si per homines hominibus deus verbum suum ministrare nolle videretur. Quomodo enim verum esset quod dictum est, templum enim dei sanctum est, quod estis vos, si deus de humano templo responsa non redderet et totum quod discendum hominibus tradi vellet de caelo atque per angelos personaret? Deinde ipsa caritas, quae sibi homines invicem nodo unitatis astringit, non haberet adytum refundendorum et quasi miscendorum sibimet animorum, si homines per homines nihil discerent. Et certe illum spadonem, qui Esaiam prophetam legens non intellegebat, neque ad apostolum angelus misit nec ei per angelum id quod non intellegebat expositum aut divinitus in mente sine hominis ministerio revelatum est, sed potius suggestionem divina missus est ad eum seditque cum eo Philippus, qui

Like Paul, Lutgard was a visionary who required other human beings to enact the implications of her visionary experience. Like the eunuch, she relied on interpreters to explain divine messages “in human words and human language.” Her “unlettered” status as *laica* can then be understood as a device that underscores her humility and, paradoxically, reveals her to be a model reader.

Unlike the hagiographical and scholastic formulations of women’s illiteracy discussed above—where to be *illitterata* was to be marked by humility, enabling men to protect their privileged status—for Augustine, it was *literacy* that was a mark of humility and *caritas*. Literacy contrasted with visionary knowledge, which veered into the dangerous territory of pride and self-reliance, and rendered hermeneutical and rhetorical techniques unnecessary. Thus, when the *VLA* is read along with Augustine’s *DDC* (which Thomas uses to open the *vita*), we see that Lutgard’s representation as *laica* does not simply relegate her to the realm of “mute flesh” or charismatically gifted yet intellectually stunted holy woman. In fact, it represents her as an exemplarily humble interpreter of scripture. Thomas transvalues the category of literacy, moving from a scholastic to an Augustinian formulation, turning it from a mark of clerical privilege to an indicator and expression of humility. Meanwhile, the charismatic knowledge of the visionary, typically ascribed to women in the late medieval period as a mark of humility and separation from male clerical prerogative, becomes a risky phenomenon whose potential arrogance is tempered by literacy. The divine and human, vision and text, are

noverat Esaïam prophetam, eique humanis verbis et lingua quod in scriptura illa tectum erat aperuit.”

represented as mutually supporting. Thus, when Lutgard's vision confirms the gloss (II.33), the gloss also confirms her vision.

The most forceful instance of Lutgard's representation as illiterate occurs in I.12. The passage is yet another iteration of the typology of the soul's progress in tripartite vignettes, suggesting not only the three stages of the soul's growth but also the fabulous trope of the three wishes.

First, in response to her abundant compassion, she received an ability to heal by means of her saliva or touch. However, this gift left her overwhelmed by crowds. She asked that in exchange for this gift, she better understand (*intelligam*) the Psalter, so that she might be more devout (*ad maiorem devotionem*). Lutgard's request was granted and she miraculously understood the Psalter "more lucidly" (*lucidius intellexit*). However, the divine gift again did not satisfy. Thomas writes that "she had not yet made as much progress (*proficere*) in this grace as she had expected—for the reverence of a veiled mystery (*reverentia velati mysterii*) is the mother of devotion, what is hidden (*res celata*) is the more avidly sought (*avidius quaeritus*), and what is concealed is looked upon with more veneration (*venerabilius absconsa conspicitur*)." Though the gift bestowed understanding, the revelation of what was before hidden hindered rather than intensified her desire by delivering too much clarity. Like William's bride whose desire is impelled by the absence of the bridegroom, Lutgard required mystery to impel her devotion. "What use is it to me to know the secrets of Scripture," Thomas has her exclaim in an explicit invocation of the illiteracy and simplicity *topoi*, "I, an unlettered, uncultivated, and uneducated nun?" (*idiotae et rusticae et laicae moniali*).

Lutgard asked that, instead of this knowledge of the Psalter, she might have God's heart. He gallantly asked for hers, a request to which she agreed if he would "temper your heart's love to my heart and that I may possess my heart in you" (*ut cordis tui amorem cordi meo contemperes & in te cor meum possideam*). Thomas describes this "communion of hearts" (gesturing to Bernard and William) as the "union of an uncreated with a created spirit" (*unjo spiritus increati & creati*), such as Paul describes, one "who clings to God is made one spirit with him" (*Quae adhaeret Deo, unus spiritus efficitur*) (1 Cor. 6:17).⁴⁰⁶ From this union, Lutgard enjoyed Christ's guardianship of her heart, which prevents any fleshly temptation or impure thought from disturbing her mind.⁴⁰⁷

This communion of hearts performs what Bernard and William describe as the translation of the reader's experience into the terms of the bride. Thomas literalizes Bernard's notion of the *liber experientiae*, which through reading and *askesis* is purified, such that the subject's experience becomes that of the other. Thus, while Lutgard initially desired the understanding of the Psalms with a devout love—a love that is the mark, according to William, of the good, simple, animal soul who (*Exp. Sg.* 16)—her understanding (*intellectum*) was not yet of a nature to be "read within" the heart. The exchange of hearts—the tempering of Christ's heart to her own such that they exist in a perichoretic unity—translated Christ's interiority into her.

⁴⁰⁶ Barbara Newman notes that this is the first mention of the "exchange of hearts" in the medieval tradition, a *topos* that will recur in Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude of Helfta in the next generation. Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Collected Saints' Lives*, p. 227, n. 63. Newman has forthcoming book on the theme of the exchange of hearts in the secular courtly love and the mystical traditions.

⁴⁰⁷ This narrative further confuses the temporal progression of Lutgard's *Life*, as she seems here to have achieved a state later deemed impossible in this life, namely to have perfect concentration and "banish every thought while saying the Hours" (II.17).

We should not, then, read Lutgard's self-description as *idiotae et rusticae et laicae moniali* simply as a statement of her inability to read. Thomas attributes great understanding to her, an understanding that is, in some sense, *too* great, for it dissolved the desire that is incited by the text's obscurity (which mimics the bridegroom's absence). Her proclamation makes sense only if read through Thomas's theological matrix. The figure for William's exegete, who is passing into the spiritual stage, is the "simple soul" who "recognizes how he failed in poverty, humility and simplicity before he was dignified by this knowledge [of God] and understanding [of enlightened love]." As Bernard argued that the reader must turn to his conscience, so William writes that the progressing soul should apply "his faculties, made keener by simplicity," to the awareness of his own failure, "relying less on book learning (*litteratura*) than on the powers of the Lord and his justice alone" (*Exp. Sg.* 21).⁴⁰⁸ The one who has found knowledge through study must *return* to simplicity in order that those faculties exalted by intellectual success might be strengthened through an experience of dependence on divine power. The simplicity of the beginner recurs, though in a higher key, in the spiritual state.

William's equations of literacy and arrogance seem to stand in opposition to the views of Augustine, who pairs literacy with humility. However, it is worth noting that William's distinction between divinely and textually obtained knowledge appears *in a book*—indeed, in a passage that cites yet another text. Given this literary context, it seems

⁴⁰⁸ "Sed rursum, divinae gratia illa cognitionis, quae sicut dictum est non fit nisi in sensu, vel intellectu illuminati amoris...quanto beatus pauper spiritu, et humilis, et quietus, et tremens sermonis Domini, et simplex animus, cum quo solet esse sermocinatio Spiritus sancti, anete cognitionis vel intellectus ipsius reverentiam, paupertatis, et humilitatis, et simplicitatis suae verius et devotius recognoverit infirmitates; et sensus ad hoc attulerit, tanto subtiliores, quanto simpliciores; non tam in litteratura, quam in potentiis Domini, et in iustitia ejus solius."

better to understand William's assertion of the limits of literature as an appeal to the paradoxical passivity of a cultivated humility, the *affect* of humility affected in the soul by the divine power through the medium of the text. Thus, William's appeal to dependence on divine power as opposed to "literature" is a comment on the uses and relation of various kinds of knowledge, rather than a denunciation of the book in itself, or its prohibition for those who receive infused knowledge.⁴⁰⁹ For William and Augustine, the aim is the cultivation of humility, humility that arises through a dependence on something other than the independent self, whether that be a text or God.

Literacy in the *VLA*

The monastic vocabulary of literacy recurs in the *Life* with reference to Lutgard's reading practices. Thus, while the construction of her illiteracy foregrounds her humility and represents the affective nature of her understanding, Thomas is also concerned to present her in the classical terms of a Cistercian student of the Bible, even as these terms are represented in keeping with what is appropriate to each stage of spiritual progression.

In the earliest stages of her conversion, when she was a "simple" girl (*simplex*), her will still inclining towards a human rather than divine bridegroom, Christ "appeared (*apparuit*) to her in that human form" (*in ipsa forma humanitatis*) taken at the

⁴⁰⁹ The fraught relation between learning and the love for God—sometimes articulated as a distinction between the clerical and the monastic spheres, though that dichotomy is not a simple one—in Western monasticism was the subject of Jean Leclercq's *Love of Learning and the Desire for God*. He argues that the relation between study and the desire for eternal life (which demanded detachment from all things earthly, including learning) was a constantly negotiated tension, which never achieved an ideal synthesis but was differently articulated throughout history (p. 23). The different articulations of this tension can be seen here in this comparison of Augustine and William, and in the complex way in which Thomas attempts to portray Lutgard's humility in relation to the book.

incarnation. He shows Lutgard his bleeding side wound and tells her, “Do not seek any longer the caresses of unseemly love. Here you may perpetually contemplate (*contemplare*) what you should love.... Here I pledge (*spondeo*) that you shall attain the delights of total purity” (I.2).⁴¹⁰ Terms of physical sight dominate the language of the passage. A young man attempts to steal a glimpse of Lutgard by “observing” (*observaret*) the right time and place to conceal himself outside her house. With the appearance of Christ, the context shifts to the vision of the divine suitor, who is described with the verbs *appareo*, *video*, *ostendo*, and *contemplare*. In this transition to divine sight, the terms of sensory vision remain intact. Likewise, Reypens argues that the term *forma* when used to refer to the humanity of Christ indicates that the vision is physical in nature.⁴¹¹ This physical vision of Christ’s human form is consonant with William’s description of the animal stage in which, as noted above, the simple, devout soul prays to Christ *secundum formam humanam* (*Exp. Sg.* 16).

This vision of Christ in his humanity moves into a new register in I.3, in which the language of vision aligns with terms derived from reading:

Alarmed by such an oracle (*oraculo*), Lutgard therefore immediately held fast (*haesit*) with the eyes of her heart (*oculis cordis*) to what she had seen

⁴¹⁰ “Quam cum juvenis, divitiis pollens & genere, procaretur, animum interdum cœpit verbis illius leniter inclinare. Cumque tempus & locum juvenis observaret, clam de nocte domum, in qua virgo jacebat, adire tentabat. Nec mora: cum accessisset, repentino timore correptus aufugit. Institit ergo diabolus miris modis, ut ad consensum. puellarem animum inclinaret: sed frustra, quia Omnipotens non permisit. Cumque ad colloquium juvenis simplex quandoque puella sederet, apparuit ipsi Christus in ipsa humanitatis forma, qua inter homines quondam fuerat conversatus; & pectori vestem detrahens, qua videbatur obtectus, vulnus lateris ostendit, quasi recenti sanguine cruentatum, dicens: Blanditias inepti amoris ulterius non requiras: hic jugiter contemplare quid diligas, & cur diligas: hic totius puritatis delicias tibi spondeo consequendas” (Col.0237D-0237E).

⁴¹¹ L. Reypens, “Sint Lutgarts mystieke opgang,” in *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 20 (1946), 7-49 (pp. 17-19). Noted by Newman in the English translation, p. 218, n. 22.

(*vidisset*). Like a dove meditating (*meditans*) at a window at the entrance of the sunlight, she keenly observed (*observabat*) the crystalline opening of the Ark, the typological Body of Christ (*arcae typici*). At once her fleshly bloom was consumed away and, like every lover, her countenance paled. Inwardly brightened by a supernal brilliance, she sensed (*sensit*) that what she had lost was the darkness of total vanity.⁴¹²

The vision of Christ's human form enters Lutgard's heart (prefiguring the later exchange of hearts). She holds fast to its memory, "meditating" on it. According to Jean Leclercq, in the monastic context, "one cannot meditate on anything else but a text."⁴¹³ Meditation on the page is a fixing of the words in the memory—as we now say, "learning by heart." However, rather than a proper text, Lutgard meditates on her vision of Christ's body, extending the referential scope of Leclercq's textuality. If one can meditate only on texts in a monastic context, then vision here becomes text. What Lutgard actually sees in this meditation, however, is not the bleeding side wound described in I.2 but the "typological body of Christ," the Ark of the Covenant. Thomas transposes Lutgard's visionary experience into the terms of the textual practice of the typological reading of Old Testament in the terms of the New, and thus emphasizes the textuality of Lutgard's vision, tying her act of meditation even more intimately to that of *lectio*. In her meditation on her first vision of Christ's human form, she "observed" his body as a crystalline opening to the ark; it is as if she turned a page and found a new passage that

⁴¹² "Tali igitur Lutgardis oraculo pavefacta, statim oculis cordis hæsit, quid vidisset excipere: & quasi columba meditans, in fenestra ad introitum solaris luminis, ostium crystallinum arcae typici corporis Christi pertinaciter observabat. Mox flore carnis abeso, vultu palluit, ut omnis amans: & superno interius splendore lustrata, totius vanitatis se sensit amisisse caliginem" (Col. 0237E).

⁴¹³ J. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, p. 16.

was the shadow and copy of the first.⁴¹⁴ By comparing her with a dove, Thomas furthermore suggests that Lutgard's allegorical practice began transforming her into the bride, for like the bride and dove of Sg. 5:2, in her meditation she "slept but [her] heart was awake."

The assimilation of Lutgard's visionary experience to the language of reading continues in I.13. Having been roused from a fever and impelled by an auditory vision to go to church for Matins, she meets Christ at the entrance to the church, nailed to the cross. In an intensification of the vision of his wound in I.2, he

embraced her who was standing opposite and pressed her mouth against the wound in his right side. There she drank in so much sweetness that, from that time forward she was always stronger and quicker in the service of God. Those to whom she revealed this event have reported and certified that then and for a long time afterwards the saliva in her mouth tasted mellower than the sweetest honey. What is there to wonder in this? "Your lips, my bride, are a dripping honeycomb." Thus did her heart inwardly ruminate (*ruminabat*) on the honey of Christ's divinity and the milk of his humanity even when her tongue was silent (I.13).⁴¹⁵

This passage seems to manifest the literalization of female piety described by Barratt, one that reduces speech and interiority to the flesh. Vision replaces language and operates in a realm free from textuality, even as the constitution of Lutgard's own body changes.

However, Thomas describes this bodily experience as her "inward rumination." He thus places Lutgard within the privileged sphere of the choir monks rather than that of the

⁴¹⁴ This description of the visionary moment leads to the inevitable question of whether Lutgard's first vision arose while she was reading or looking at an icon of the bleeding Christ or the Ark of the Covenant, a hypothesis that makes sense given the scene's elaboration in terms of typology. However, Thomas does not make this explicit.

⁴¹⁵ "In ipso ostio ecclesiae ei Christus cruci affixus cruentatus occurrit: deponensque brachium cruci affixum, amplexatus est occurrentem, & os ejus vulnere dextri lateris applicavit. Ubi tantum dulcedinis hausit, quod semper ex tunc in Dei servitio robustior & alacrior fuit. Referebant qui haec, illa revelante, illo in tempore & diu postea probaverunt, quod saliva oris ejus super omnem mellis dulcorem suavius sapiebat. Quid miri? Favus distillans labia tua, Sponsa; & mel divinitatis, & lac humanitatis Christi, etiam tacente lingua, cor interius ruminabat" (Col. 0239E).

conversi, who were relegated to the brute reality of their physicality as they worked the fields and performed violent ascetic feats in identification with Christ's suffering flesh, a physicality that their hagiographers marked as indelibly masculine. For the choir monks, on the other hand, physical labor included the ruminative reading of scripture, a repetition on the tongue that fixed the text in memory and thereby translated body and mind into the terms of the text. It was their privileged means of becoming the bride. I would argue that the techniques of literalization employed by Thomas in this description of Lutgard are his attempt to capture the physicality of monastic meditation and allegory.

Jean Leclercq notes that *lectio divina* and meditation were often described with the vivid verb *ruminatio*, which refers to the extended digestion of some animals. Rumination is the work of scriptural memorization. It "inscribes, so to speak, the sacred text in the body and in the soul." Memorization proceeds through the "mastication" of divine words, *speaking* the page repeatedly until its nutritive value is fully extracted and assimilated by the reader."⁴¹⁶ While Barratt understands *ruminatio* to indicate the reduction of speech to bodiliness, it is a vital verb in monastic reading culture, one that indicates less the reduction of speech to bodiliness than a process of spiritual formation through mutual disciplining. Thus, Lutgard ruminates on the "text" of Christ's body and the Christological doctrine of the two natures of Christ. Her rumination—an inward performance, in William's terms—is so successful that she becomes the bride of the Song 4.11, whose "lips are a dripping honeycomb," tasting the text until her own mouth tastes sweet to others. Her actions offer commentary on the biblical text as well as replication of it; in her performance of the role of the bride, Lutgard becomes text and embodies the

⁴¹⁶ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, p. 73.

union with Christ promised by mystical marriage. As Origen instructs readers of the Song in *De Principiis*, she “portrayed the text upon” her own soul and body.

This assimilation to the bride recurs in 1.16 when, after contemplative prayer, Lutgard’s hands drip with oil. She shows (*ostendabat*) them to her friend “as if she were drunk,” saying, “I am so filled up inwardly by his superabundant grace that now my fingers are outwardly dripping a kind of oil as a manifestation of grace” (*repleor interius...exterius ad signifcandum gratiam*). Lutgard exegetes her dripping hands not only as a sacrament—an outward sign of an inward grace—but in reference to the bride in Song 5.5, who says, “My hands dripped with myrrh, and my fingers were full of the choicest myrrh.” Once again, the exterior, physical event is tied intimately to the interior workings of contemplation. The bodily miracle finds authority and warrant in the biblical text, even as Lutgard’s body becomes text, recapitulating the Song of Songs in its performance. Her allegorization of the text transmutes the letter into spirit (the carnal bride into the bride of Christ), but the spirit of the text again becomes “letter” as it lives in the particular lineaments of her flesh.

In associating verbs of reading and meditation with Lutgard’s visionary experience, Thomas may seem to rely on Gregory the Great’s famous dictum that images are appropriate for the laity who do not understand the written word. Thus, these passages could be understood as a recapitulation of Lutgard’s illiteracy. Thomas’s portrayal of Lutgard meditating on Christ’s body as text—in which *lectio divina* becomes, in effect, *lectio domini*—is a precocious example of a phenomenon emphasized in later vernacular treatises written for the laity, who had neither the time nor skills for the ruminative

practices of monks and nuns.⁴¹⁷ However, to meditate on the body of Christ, particularly in the Passion, was not only the provenance of the illiterate; it was also elaborated by twelfth-century Cistercians as part of the very development of the notion of the book of experience and the affective understanding and transformation by reading.⁴¹⁸ By transferring Lutgard's reading practice to visions of Christ, I argue, Thomas attempts to render visible in bodily images what Cistercians articulate in theological commentary. The *vita* represents Lutgard as a woman who not only receives inexplicable visions but who also performs the entire exercise of allegorical interpretation and rumination upon those visions. The effect of these actions, as Bernard and William outline, transforms her into the bride, full of divine love.

Conclusion

The view that Thomas, in representing Lutgard as an illiterate who has "trouble with language," relegates her to the confines of her body and its intractable femininity is unable to account for the complexity of Thomas's notion of reading and Lutgard's exemplarity of Cistercian reading practices. The interpenetration of reading and experience, communicated in the monastic tradition through Origen, Cassian, Bernard, and William, is vital to the construction of Lutgard's exemplarity, for by representing Lutgard taking biblical exemplars into her soul and body, Thomas implicitly suggests how Lutgard's exemplarity becomes available to his readers in their own acts of reading the *vita*. In the allegorical imagination of Christian monasticism, exegetical acts issue in a

⁴¹⁷ Vincent Gillespie, "Lukyng in Haly Bukes: *Lectio* in some Late Medieval Spiritual Miscellanies," *Analecta Cartusiana* 106 (1984), p. 11.

⁴¹⁸ J. Leclercq, "Aspects Spirituels," p. 66.

performance of the text within the body and affect that recapitulates and, in Cassian's formulation, fulfills the scriptural text by making it present in history. Similarly, for William, the allegorist "follow[s]...through these metaphors of divine love" until the "outward dramatic allegory becomes in it a true story" (*Exp. Sg.*, 144). The stages through which the bridal soul passes are not confined to the page, operating as two dimensions to be observed by readers. Rather, textual exegesis and meditation are in fact operations performed *on the reader*, rendering the textual model through one's own soul and body. The bride's desire becomes the reader's desire.

In representing Lutgard as a masterful reader of the Song, Thomas implicitly figures the *vita* as a commentary on the Song, not unlike the expositions of William or Origen. Thus, even as William built the edifice of his exegesis on the exemplar of the bride, so Thomas read and wrote Lutgard as the bride in order that he might "set love free" in his own readers (*Exp. Sg.*, 4). As a living allegory of the Song, Lutgard models the knowledge of a reader who understands by reading within: *intus legere*. Assimilated to the bride, she is the scriptural text brought to life and re-textualized by Thomas in order to become available to his audience for their adoption and adaptation.

Embodying the stages of the bridal drama in the complex plot of the *Life*, Thomas's Lutgard is a reader who reads the text within her heart even as it is inscribed on and performed by her flesh. While such an embodied notion of reading clearly resonates with constructions of women as bodily and lowly, learning through experience rather than literature, I have argued that this construction conforms to Cistercian conceptions of the ideal reader, conceptions that Thomas self-consciously invokes throughout the *Life*. In this view, what has been understood as Lutgard's "trouble with language" is, in fact,

its apotheosis of Cistercian ideals, in which language and literacy are manifest in the experience of the saint assimilated to the text of the Song.

Chapter Five

The Uses of Astonishment: Exemplarity, Apophasis, and the Writing of Mystical Hagiography

According to every effect he had been able to trace, he was of the opinion that the pleasure we receive arose, not from its being a *copy* but from its being an imitation, and the word imitation itself means always a combination of a certain degree of dissimilitude with a certain degree of similitude. If it were merely the same as looking at a glass reflection, we should receive no pleasure. A waxen image, after once it had been seen, pleased no longer, or very little, but when the resemblance of a thing given upon a canvas or a flat surface, then we were delighted... We take the purest parts and combine it with our own minds, with our own hopes, with our own inward yearnings after perfection, and being frail and imperfect, we wish to have a shadow, a sort of prophetic existence present to us, which tells us what we are not, but yet, blending in us much that we are, promises great things of what we may be.

–S. T. Coleridge, *Lectures on Shakespeare* (“On poetry as an imitation, not a copy”)

From Inexpressibility to Ineffability: The Wondrous and the Apophatic in the *Life of Lutgard of Aywières*

The fifth-century *Life of Saint Martin of Tours* by Sulpicius Severus (d. 397) contains several *topoi* that became standard in medieval Christian hagiography.⁴¹⁹ Eyewitnesses confirm the authenticity of Martin’s miracles and testify to his holiness, spreading his fame and giving the *vita* authority in the face of what the author believes to

⁴¹⁹ As a well-educated author, Sulpicius Severus was familiar with the Latin *Life of Antony* and the Latin fathers as well as classical conventions of good Latin, and the metrics of proper prose. While he had no Gallic predecessors on which to model Martin, F.R. Hoare argues that Sulpicius was attempting to promote Martin as another Antony, aligning him with the venerable figure in order to oppose those who saw Martin simply as uncouth and unworthy of Episcopal office, which in Gaul was generally held by the refined and urbane. See *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints’ Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), p. 2.

be the inevitable skepticism of his readers because of the miraculous nature of his tale.⁴²⁰

This authorization through eyewitnesses is further strengthened by Sulpicius Severus's own claims to having heard some of the material "from Martin's own lips" (ch. 24).

There is a concern to mitigate the tedium of the narrative—inevitable if one were to attempt to comprehensively account for all Martin's wondrous deeds—so that the claim of narrative minimization in fact emphasizes the largeness of the topic (Preface).

The hagiographer invokes the humility *topos* in the dedication to the work, where he asks his friend, Desiderius, to circulate the text without his name attached (as many write the Lives of others in an attempt to bask in their reflected glory), and laments his unpolished diction and unworthiness to perform his important task (ch. 1).

Sulpicius Severus's claim of authorial incapacity is closely related to what Curtius calls the inexpressibility *topos*. The *topos*, Curtius notes, is found in Homer and in the panegyric of all ages. Its basic form is a claim of an "inability to cope with the subject."⁴²¹ Thus Sulpicius Severus writes that Martin "is beyond my powers to describe" (ch. 10), that "no language...could ever depict his interior life, his everyday behavior and his mind ever fixed upon heaven" (ch. 26), and that "not even Homer, if, as the saying goes, he returned from Hades, could do justice to [to him]...it was all so much greater in Martin than words can express" (ch. 26). Claims concerning the subject's inexpressibility extend the humility *topos*, which not only asserts Sulpicius Severus's writerly modesty, but describes the saint through negation: Martin is so praiseworthy and wondrous that he

⁴²⁰ Sulpicius Severus, *The Life of Martin of Tours*, Translated by F. R. Hoare in *Soldiers of Christ* from *Vie de Saint Martin*, ed. and trans. by Jacques Fontaine, 3 vols., *Sources Chrétiennes*, nos. 133, 134, 135 (Paris, 1967, 1968, 1969).

⁴²¹ E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 160.

escapes the capacity of language to name him. The panegyrist can at most make partial attempts at description, ever aware of the inevitable failure of the enterprise.

The intimate relation between the humility and inexpressibility *topoi* means that the author is implicated in his assertion of the holy person's ineffability. Both the author's incompetence and the nature of his subject define the limits of hagiographical representation. This relation of the two *topoi*, however, is complicated by a tension between them: is the failure of representation due to the author's inability to use words with sufficient rhetorical skill, or is it due to the nature of the subject, such that the author is humbled by the holy person's grandeur? This very confusion constitutes the mutual dependence of the two *topoi*: Sulpicius Severus is humbled by his subject, placed in a position of authorial incapacity by Martin's splendor, even as his inability to describe the saint re-emphasizes the saint's majesty and inexpressibility.

The exercise the virtue of humility in the hagiographical task is one that makes the work of writing the saint's *Life* a spiritual practice. As Derek Krueger argues,

Remarks denigrating style draw attention to the author's prose, rendering it an object for reflection. The text...records the author's own *askesis*. It ...become[s] a relic of the performance of the virtue of humility, his imitation of the saints and Christ.⁴²²

According to Krueger, the repetition of commonplaces such as the humility *topos* are ritual utterances that indicate and inculcate religious ideals. The humility *topos* "ritually humiliate[s]" the text and, in a further act of humiliation, conforms it to a model. Because the text is an extension of the writer's body, an operation on the text is, according to

⁴²²Derek Krueger, "Hagiography as an Ascetic Practice in the Early Christian East," *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 79, No. 2 (April 1999), p. 230.

Krueger, an operation on that body.⁴²³ A hagiographer does not simply describe an object, but is transformed by and implicated in the act of telling.

The nature of the hagiographer's involvement with his or her saintly subject and the question of how to read claims of an inability to render a topic in language, however, change in history of Christian hagiographical writing. In the context of the *Life* of a holy woman composed by a male author, the inexpressibility and humility *topoi* become gendered sites, revealing much about the dynamic between the holy woman and her male hagiographer.

In what follows, I consider Thomas of Cantimpré's use of the inexpressibility and humility *topoi* in the *Life of Lutgard of Aywières*. Like Sulpicius Severus, Thomas implicates himself in the saint's *Life* through these *topoi*. However, in the *Life of Lutgard*, there is a profound shift in their use from their fifth-century precedent.⁴²⁴ First, while in the *Life of Saint Martin of Tours* the inexpressibility *topos* has the doubled effect of describing the saint and engendering humility in Sulpicius Severus, in the *VLA*, the inexpressibility *topos* is deployed both to describe Lutgard and one of her private visionary experiences in which she encounters the ineffability of God. This encounter, in turn, renders her ineffable to Thomas's eye, compromising his descriptive efforts. Second, Thomas not only describes Lutgard's ineffability; in an important passage where he gives an account of *his* experience of her holiness, the inexpressibility *topos* is used again. The hagiographer's imitation of the saint thus extends here from a mimesis of

⁴²³ Ibid., p. 232.

⁴²⁴ Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita Lutgardis Aquiriensis*. In *Acta Sanctorum*, ed. by G. Henschen, 16 June, III, pp. 187-209. Hereafter referred to within the text as *VLA*. English translation, unless otherwise noted, from *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints' Lives*, trans. by Margot H. King and Barbara Newman (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).

saintly humility in the acknowledgment of the limitations of representational power—such as Krueger addresses and Sulpicius Severus performs—to an imitation of the saint’s ineffable experience of God. However, while Lutgard has a vision of God, Thomas has a vision of *Lutgard*. The visionary “becomes a vision” for the hagiographer, a spectacle of wonder that capsizes Thomas’s linguistic power, enabling him to have an experience of ecstatic rapture through the humiliation of his intellectual capacities in the face of her incredible presence.⁴²⁵ The act of writing the hagiographical account of these two visionary moments is a performance essential to Thomas’s realization and continuation of this rapturous encounter. *Writing the vita* becomes, for Thomas, a spiritual practice whereby he incites and consummates his desire for the ineffable holy women.

Amy Hollywood argues that the need to create vivid and compelling narratives led hagiographers to represent the interior states of the soul by means of marking the body of the female saint. She notes that this externalization was facilitated, first, by the misogynistic cultural identification of women with the body, such that sanctification was achieved through and visible in the flesh of female saints. Second, visionary experience was tied to the imagination, an ambiguous faculty understood to mediate the bodily and spiritual realms by means of its production of immaterial images of material substances.⁴²⁶ Because women’s religious authority often derived from their visionary

⁴²⁵ Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1995), p. 35.

⁴²⁶ On the mediating function of the imagination and its complex and confusing relation to the body in spiritual vision, see Augustine’s attempt to discern the status of Paul’s rapture in *The Literal Commentary on Genesis*, Bk. XII. Images—the product of the imagination—are the product of a mixture of the corporeal and incorporeal, and stand in distinction to the perception of “substance” by the intellectual faculty Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. by John Hammond Taylor, (New York: Newman Press, 1982), XII, p. 181.

experience and were thus included in women's *vitae* as proof of their sanctity, a hagiographer seeking dramatic narrative effects could easily (and often did) translate internal visionary experiences into somatic terms.⁴²⁷ In contrast to the externalizing strategies of hagiography, women's own mystical writing of the thirteenth century, though often using physical images and metaphors to describe visionary experiences, also, in a radically anti-essentializing gesture, "subvert[ed] their visionary images through apophasis."⁴²⁸ The *modus loquendi* of mystical texts—*apophasis*, the unsaying of representation—is, Hollywood argues, "notably absent" in hagiographical texts.⁴²⁹

Thomas's extended use of the ineffability *topos* as a means not only to represent Lutgard's visionary experience but to mime that experience and thus achieve his own visionary encounter is, I will argue, his attempt to speak apophatically in a hagiographical context, to perform a mystical *modus loquendi* that enacts what is elsewhere thematized—union with the unspeakable godhead—by means of images, particularly those derived from the Song of Songs, and exegetical glosses on scriptural passages. In the extended use of the ineffability *topos*, Thomas attempts to unsay his descriptive efforts and thus divest himself of the role of witness in the hagiographical context. The way in which Thomas acknowledges the limits of representation enables the saying of the saint to become a play between secrecy and revelation, veiling and unveiling, though because of the externalizing demands of the hagiographical genre, this play is most

⁴²⁷ Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, p. 35.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

typically manifest as a tension between external and internal inscriptions of divine union, witnessing and being, the veiled and the unveiling.

If, for Sulpicius Severus, Martin's hyperbolic greatness entailed the failure of language to capture him, for Thomas, Lutgard exceeds not only the capacity of his language—all language—to describe her but of the mind to comprehend her. This shift is one from the inexpressibility to what Simone Roisin names the “ineffability” *topos*. Roisin argues that the ineffability *topos* is Curtius's inexpressibility *topos* articulated within the register of apophatic theology. The *topos* is a key element in the articulation of new emphases in Cistercian hagiographical writing in thirteenth-century Liège, including Thomas's *Life of Lutgard*, which Roisin considers. According to Roisin, these hagiographies were a new genre, which she termed “mystical biography.”⁴³⁰ Mystical biography described a new kind of saint in a new milieu, their subjects being not solely aristocratic, both genders, and all economic classes. Virtues celebrated in these *vitae* included asceticism, charity, poverty, and union with God through contemplation—in short, a “total and continual crucifixion of nature.”⁴³¹ These foci contrast with older hagiographical valorizations of thaumaturgical deeds, courageous missionaries, or impressive episcopal administrators.⁴³² The saints of mystical biography were depicted

⁴³⁰ Simone Roisin, *L'Hagiographie Cistercienne dans le diocèse de Liège au XIIIe siècle* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1947), p. 8.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, p. 8, p. 11.

using “sensible devotion to Christ to rise to the sublime contemplation of divinity.”⁴³³ In this portrayal, they became the “concrete realization” of doctrine.⁴³⁴

The ineffability *topos*, which presents the saint as so inflected by divine grace that the hagiographer can only represent her through language that deliberately unsays itself, was essential to the portrayal of saints whose primary activity was the seeking of divine union, for if the saint becomes one with a God who defies all attempts to be captured in language, then the saint, too, becomes unnameable. The writing of such a saint must defeat the descriptive and taxonomic capacity of the hagiographer’s human language. Mystical biography thus makes use of the textual procedures of mystical theology in order to describe the mystic saint.

In order to delineate the category of mystical biography and determine the function of rhetorical gestures such as the ineffability and humility *topoi*, Roisin examines Ludwig Zoepf’s attempt to distinguish among biography, *vita* (which contains elements of biography along with miracles), and legend (biography that is dominated by the supernatural element) within the ideal category of hagiography.⁴³⁵ She argues that writers of mystical biography knew what it was to attend to the facts of a life, particularly as these authors knew or were contemporaries of the subjects whom they eulogized. The *vitae* thus attempted to reflect the life stories of their friends and colleagues and were, furthermore, written for others who also knew the saint and would thus be less amenable to exaggeration or the reduction of a friend to a “vulgar pastiche” of literary and

⁴³³ Ibid., p. 140.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., p. 275.

⁴³⁵ See L. Zoepf, *Das Heiligen-Leben im 10 Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: 1908), pp. 34-35.

rhetorical tropes.⁴³⁶ However, within this overarching “biographical drive,” Roisin notes that these writers *did* resort to hagiographical conventions in their compositions, including protestations of incompetence, supplications to the reader to tolerate their poor style, and anticipations of the difficulty the audience will have believing the narrative. The use of these commonplaces, Roisin argues, must be contextualized within the biographical frame and understood as necessary to the authors’ attempts to render their subjects vividly and truthfully. The use of traditional *topoi* was not, then, a way to circumvent the effort of writing by creating a narrative tissue of dramatically rendered hagiographical conventions in order to construct a putatively new narrative, nor an invocation of a humble piety, nor again an unreflective use of rhetorical conventions. Rather, she argues, the deployment of such *topoi* must be understood as essential to the attempt to render the saint with the greatest possible clarity.⁴³⁷

For Roisin, when the authors of mystical biography write that they are unable to express the divine as glimpsed through human language, it must be read as part of generic demands particular to their context and project: they deploy this language because they understand the saint to be a theophany who requires an apophatic text in order to do justice to the manifestation of God on earth. Like must express like. Mystical language must portray the mystical saint. As it is used in mystical biography, the humility and ineffability *topoi* are rhetorical means of assimilating hagiography to mystical theology, such that protestations of incapacity or incompetence demonstrate the author’s (failed)

⁴³⁶ Roisin, *L’Hagiographie Cistercienne*, p. 210.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211-212.

attempt to “enclose the divine in human words.”⁴³⁸ Claims of an inability to cope with a subject thus put the inexpressibility *topos* to new use, serving the description of the new saint emergent in a milieu of novel spiritual expressions and institutions.

I agree with Roisin’s assessment of the ineffability *topos* as more than a repetition of ancient rhetorical convention. Like her, I would argue that it has a novel purpose and effect in the context of Thomas’s thirteenth-century Cistercian hagiography, as we have already seen in the comparison with the *Life of Martin of Tours*. In what follows, I explore further the implications of the *topos* in Thomas’s representation of both Lutgard and himself, implications that I will argue are even more radical and innovative than Roisin suggests.

While thus far I have considered Thomas’s writerly practice in the *Life of Lutgard* as a mimetic operation that creates a linked chain between God, Lutgard, Thomas, and the readers of the *Life*, the ineffability at the heart of Thomas’s encounter with Lutgard refigures the possibilities and strategies of such a representational structure. Profound breaks in Thomas’s representation of Lutgard, rendered in part by means of the ineffability *topos*, ultimately issue in Thomas thematizing the failure of his textualization. Paradoxically, this failure is Thomas’s attempt to render Lutgard with greater clarity and accuracy and to forge—by means of the performance of his writing—his own encounter with the saint. Thus, the use of the ineffability *topos* has important implications for our consideration of hagiographical exemplarity. Thomas’s representation of the ineffable attempts to imitate the inimitable. A successful mimesis is one that, in this case, marks the drama of its own failed enterprise.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., p. 212.

In Book One of Lutgard's *Life*, Thomas recounts Lutgard's vision of John the Evangelist:

Now let us recall that eagle of keenest vision, namely John the Evangelist, "who drank the streams of the Gospel from the sacred fountain of the Lord's breast." An eagle appeared to her in the spirit (*in spiritu*), his wings brightly shining with such lustre that all the universe could have been enlightened by the dazzling clarity of its rays. She was so astonished (*stupefacta*) at this vision—with a wonderment exceeding any words to describe it (*super id quod dici potest admiratione*)—that she had to wait until the Lord tempered (*temperaret*) the glory of so great a spectacle to the capacity of her weak sight (*secundum capacitatem debilis aciei*). And so it happened. When the mode of the vision had been moderated (*moderatus*), she saw in contemplation (*contemplata*) that the eagle was placing its beak in her mouth and filling her soul with flashes of such ineffable light (*animam ejus tam ineffabilis luminis coruscatione replet*) that no secrets of divinity lay hidden (*laterent*) from her insofar as it is possible for mortals to know them, for as it was said to Moses, "No human shall see me and live." [Ex. 33:20] For the more abundantly she drank from the torrent of pleasure (*voluptatis*) in the house of God, the more magnificently the eagle found the capacity of her heart increased by her desire (*extensum desiderio*) (I.15).⁴³⁹

The passage begins by recounting an important visionary experience Lutgard had in the early years of her Benedictine profession, before she transferred to a Cistercian community. It is narrated alongside other accounts of vivid visions and moments when she is described as *rapiebatur in spiritu*, lifted beyond awareness and control of her physical body. These other raptures are, like that depicted in I.15, predominantly oral in

⁴³⁹ "Proinde ad recordationem illius acutissimae visionis aquilae, Joannis scilicet Euangelistae, qui fluentia Euangelii de ipso sacro Dominici pectoris fonte potavit; apparuit ei in spiritu aquila, tanto pennarum nitore refulgens, ut totus potuisset orbis illius claritatis radiis illustrari. Ad visionem ergo illius super id quod dici potest admiratione nimia stupefacta; praestolabatur ut Dominus, secundum capacitatem debilis aciei, tanti speculationis gloriam temperaret. Et factus est ita. Visionis ergo modum moderatus contemplata, vidit quod aquilia ori suo rostrum imponeret, & animam ejus tam ineffabilis luminis coruscatione replet, ut secundum id quod viventibus possibile est (quia Moysi dictum est; Non videbit me homo, & vivet) nulla eam divinitatis secreta laterent. Tanto enim de torrente voluptatis abundantius hausit in domo, quanto magnificentior Aquila vas cordis ejus extensum desiderio magis inuenit" (Col. 0240B).

nature. They include two visions of Lutgard sucking sweetness from Christ's side wound (I.13; I.14), an experience of her hands dripping oil while she was spiritually "inebriated" (*ebria*) (I.16), and Christ the lamb sucking a melody of "wondrous mellowness" from her mouth (I.19). However, in this case, Thomas attaches a description of his own experience when listening to the wisdom of Lutgard's teaching to the recounting of her vision of the eagle. The two portions of the passage are carefully linked.

Concerning this matter I have unerring testimony (*testimonium*) to her, as I hope in all conscience. Although she seemed and indeed was rather uncultivated and very simple (*rudis et simplicissima*) in common speech, yet in private spiritual conversations (*in spiritualis collationis secretis*), never from anyone's lips have I heard more genuine, more ardent, or more decisive (*decisa*) words in accord with the spirit of truth—to such an extent that I often accounted myself to be quite uncultivated (*rudum*) and dull in my understanding (*hebetem ad intellectum*) of her speech. I still remember the place and time when, I confess, I was so astonished (*stupuisse*) by the subtlety (*subtilitate*) of her words that, had that sweet and ineffable wonderment (*dulcis et ineffabilis admiratio*) held me any longer, it would either have rendered me mad (*amentem me*) or utterly destroyed (*extinctum*) me. Yet this did not happen at the time about which I am writing, but about sixteen years before her death.⁴⁴⁰

Thomas carefully notes the transgression of historical progression in this passage, telling the reader that that his experience of ineffable wonder upon hearing Lutgard's words did not happen at the time "about which I am writing"—the time of her early visionary experiences—but sixteen years before her death. He thus underscores the thematic

⁴⁴⁰ "In hoc autem ei secundum conscientiam, ut spero, non erroneum testimonium habeo; quod licet ipsa in communibus verbis, rudis quodammodo & simplicissima videretur & esset; tamen numquam ab ore alicujus ita sincera, ita ardentissima, ita secundum veritatis spiritum decisa verba, in spiritualis collationis secretis inueni; in tantum, ut rudem me prorsus & hebetem ad intellectum verborum ejus saepissime reputarem. Loci adhuc & temporis memor, tantum me aliquando in verborum ejus subtilitate stupuisse profiteor; ut si diu me illa dulcis & ineffabilis admiratio tenuisset, aut amentem me utique, aut extinctum penitus reddidisset. Sed hoc non isto in tempore, de quo ad praesens scribo, sed ante moretem ejus, annis ferme sedecim, fuit" (Col. 0240D).

connections between the two halves of the passage: it is not the temporal that links Lutgard's and Thomas's raptures but the dynamics and effects of their experiences. Furthermore, through this association of the two halves of the passage, Thomas draws an explicit parallel between their subjects, Lutgard and himself. However, while this parallelism aligns the figures, it also reveals important differences in their experience of rapture and what enables it.

Lutgard's mouth was filled by the divine eagle, the one who "drank the streams of the Gospel from the sacred fountain of the Lord's breast." The vision describes a supernatural infusion of the knowledge of the scriptures not unlike instances discussed in the previous chapter (I.12; II.33). However, in this case, the ineffability of the biblical revelation is emphasized. While initially blinded by the light of the vision, rendered "astonished," her "wonderment exceed[ing] any words to describe it" (*ad visionem ergo illius super id quod dici potest admiratione nimia stupefacta*), the moderation of the vision enabled her to perceive the eagle. The clarity of this perception did not, however, diminish the unspeakable quality of the encounter. Thomas describes Lutgard as replete with ineffable (*ineffabilis*) light, writing that her capacity for desire (*desiderio*) and pleasure (*voluptatis*) were increased (*extensum magis*) the more they were fulfilled.

Thomas draws upon the Bernadine inheritance essential to the *VLA* in order to describe Lutgard's desire. Bernard's Sermon 84 from the *Sermons on the Song of Songs* forwards the notion of an increase of desire for God that is incited by satiety. Bernard writes that even while contemplating the Trinity after death, there will be no end to seeking God: "I think that there will be no cessation of seeking even when he is found. God is sought by desire...and therefore that blessed finding will not beat out desire, but

will extend (*extendit*) it... Joy will be made full, but there will be no end to desire, and for this reason not to seeking either.”⁴⁴¹ In Sermon seven, Bernard quotes Psalm 35, interpreting David’s exclamation as a reference to the bride inebriated with divine love: “*Inebriabuntur ab ubertate domus tuae et torrente voluptatis tuae potabis eos.*”⁴⁴² Lutgard’s vision of the eagle is another instance of Thomas’s broad project of assimilating her to the bride.

As Lutgard’s mouth filled with the words of the eagle, so Thomas’s mouth filled with Lutgard’s words. These secret messages are passed on in a “secret conversation” that parallels the isolation of her visionary moment with the eagle. The overlapping vocabularies of the two passages further connect the visionary moments. Like Lutgard, Thomas experienced ineffable wonderment (*ineffabilis admiratio*) in the face of these

⁴⁴¹ (*Sermons on the Song of Songs* 84.1). Translation by Bernard McGinn in *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 2. *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 217. The notion of the *extensum desiderio* has a theological history much older than Bernard. While Origen of Alexandria, in line with classical Greek understanding, equated limitlessness (*apeiron*) with imperfection, a view that enabled his theorization that the first intellects found satiety (*koros*) in their original contemplation of the godhead (*De Prin.* 2.8.3), Gregory of Nyssa departed fundamentally from this tradition. For Gregory, God was necessarily boundless. The limited human creature was thus incapable of fully comprehending a divinity whose infinite nature entailed a constant exceeding of the boundaries of human understanding. Gregory’s notion of *epektasis*, derived from the verb *e0pektei/nw*, “to extend,” and in the passive, “to be extended, reach out towards,” translated in Latin as *extensum*, is culled from Phil 3:13-14 (“Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it on my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead (toi=j de\ e1mprosqen e0pekteino/menoj), I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ”). *Epektasis* is the concept is that the aim of human life on earth and in heaven is the endless stretching forth of the soul after the ever-elusive godhead whose presence is paradoxically an experience of absence. This absence means that the desire of the soul never rests in satiety, but moves “from glory to glory,” impelled and deepened by every moment of contact. Like Gregory, Bernard frequently referred to Philippians 3:13 in order to emphasize that the divine-human relation continually increases the human being’s ability to be infused by the infinite, but that no perfect infusion is possible.

⁴⁴² Bernard de Clairvaux, *Sermons sur le Cantique*, Tome I, *Sources Chrétiennes*, no. 367, (Paris: éditions du Cerf, 2007). Sermon 7.3.

divine utterances. While she was made *stupefacta* by the eagle's wisdom, he was *stupuisse*. While she seemed "uncultivated" (*rudis*) he found himself to be, in fact, the one who was "uncultivated and dull" in understanding (*hebetem ad intellectum, rudis*).

However, the language Thomas uses to describe his own ecstasy is slightly different than that which describes Lutgard. While the "blade of her mind" (*acies*) was made "lame" (*debilis*) even as her heart was enlarged by drinking the "torrent of pleasure," Thomas describes Lutgard as an active subject in her own overthrowing. It is her act of drinking or drawing forth of the stream of divine wisdom (*hausit*, an active verb), as much as the eagle pouring his secrets into her mouth, that creates the experience. In Thomas's case, he was entirely passive, even *victimized* by the power of her words. Thus he tells us, "had that sweet and ineffable wonderment held me (*tenuisset*) any longer, it would either have rendered me mad (*amentem*) or utterly destroyed (*extinctum*) me." Thus, while God gently "moderated" her vision, revealing to Lutgard a second order of the vision accessible in contemplation, for Thomas the *danger* of such vision is foregrounded; rather than receive the comfort of an interpretation by way of an attenuation of the ineffable moment, he was snatched back from the brink of madness only by the cessation of her speaking. Lutgard is like a torturer who at her own will stops her ministrations to Thomas, in contrast to her own experience of a kindly divinity who curbs the intensity of the vision in such a way that pleasure and desire continue to increase in an experience of satiety that is somehow able to be contemplated by a "debilitated" mind.

Thomas's account of Lutgard's vision conforms to the exigencies of hagiographical narrative insofar as it provides vivid images of the "spectacle"

(*speculationis*) of the radiant eagle placing its beak in Lutgard's mouth. However, the admiration (*admiratione*) and ineffability (*ineffabilis luminis*) that are caused by this spectacle are, I argue, in tension with the need to describe the vision in imagistic and objective terms.

The Latin terms for the objects of wonder (*mirabilia, miraculi, ammiranda*) and the emotion they inspire (*admiratio*), share the same root, *mir*, which refers to visual phenomenon or the act of looking (as in *miror, mirari*).⁴⁴³ Visions of wonders and the wondrousness of the visions he depicts are appealed to in Thomas's *vitae* as compelling and dramatic evidence, vital to the vivid description that makes a saint's *Life* powerful and entertaining. The visibility of miracles led Augustine to consider them as a kind of divine semiology communicating God's power and beneficence. God, he argues, planted *seminum semina* and *seminales rationes* within the one true miracle, creation, causing startling events in order to provoke the bored or jaded to have reverential wonder for the creator.⁴⁴⁴ However, as we saw in chapter two, Christina's marvelous deeds threatened to thwart the exemplary efficacy of her *vita* by rendering her in terms that threatened to be demonic or, at the very least, ridiculous. In the case of Christina's *Life*, I argued that the ambiguity of these saintly signs solicits interpretation from the audience—both readers of the *vita* and the public depicted in it—an interpretation able to frame, though not dispel, wonder, by subjecting it to a fraught process of discretion. Divine signs prove difficult to read. In the current passage from Lutgard's *Life*, however, the wondrous vision is the

⁴⁴³ Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 27.

⁴⁴⁴ Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000-1215* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), p. 3.

means to an astonishment contextualized and articulated through the discourse of mystical theology as the overthrow of the intellect in an experience of ineffability that enables the infinite extension of her desire.

In the third book of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas defines miracles as those “[t]hings that are at times divinely accomplished apart from the generally established order in things (*praeter ordinem*).” For, he continues, “we admire with some astonishment (*admiramur*) a certain event when we observe the effect but do not know its cause.”⁴⁴⁵ According to Aquinas, a miracle must have “a completely hidden (*occultam*) cause.” This cause, unknown to observers, is God, whose essence remains a mystery to the human intellect. Thus, “those things must properly be called miraculous which are done by divine power apart from the order generally followed in things.”

Likewise, as his reference to the etymology of *miraculum* indicates, Aquinas claims that the miracle incites “ad-mira,” a provocation of the intellect in the face of its failure to find the cause of a peculiar event. However, the wonder of the specifically miraculous (rather than the natural marvel, or what Aquinas would call the qualified

⁴⁴⁵ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III.101.1. Trans. by A. C. Pegis (Notre Dame Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975). Haec autem quae praeter ordinem communiter in rebus statutum quandoque divinitus fiunt, miracula dici solent: admiramur enim aliquid cum, effectum videntes, causam ignoramus. Et quia causa una et eadem a quibusdam interdum est cognita et a quibusdam ignota, inde contingit quod videntium simul aliquem effectum, aliqui mirantur et aliqui non mirantur: astrologus enim non miratur videns eclipsim solis, quia cognoscit causam; ignarus autem huius scientiae necesse habet admirari, causam ignorans. Sic igitur est aliquid mirum quoad hunc, non autem quod illum. Illud ergo simpliciter mirum est quod habet causam simpliciter occultam: et hoc sonat nomen miraculi, quod scilicet sit de se admiratione plenum, non quoad hunc vel illum tantum. Causa autem simpliciter occulta omni homini est Deus: probatum enim est supra quod eius essentiam nullus homo in statu huius vitae intellectu capere potest. Illa igitur proprie miracula dicenda sunt quae divinitus fiunt praeter ordinem communiter observatum in rebus.

miracle) finds its infinite source and end in divine ineffability.⁴⁴⁶ The wonder incited by the miracle Aquinas speaks of cannot, then, be exhausted, for the cause remains eternally unknown.

In a similar fashion, the wonder Lutgard's vision inspires has its source in the disclosure of the "secrets of divinity." The passage marks the boundary in the visionary encounter between revelation and concealment, unveiling and veiling, both in the visionary moment, with its tension between the revelation of God's secrets and that which remains undisclosed to "mortals," and in the hagiographical representation of that vision. While Thomas's account of Lutgard's vision depicts her rapt figure with the dazzlingly winged eagle's beak in her mouth—a particularly vivid image that resonates with other visions described in the first book—the passage shifts from this brilliant description of a wonder to the internal language of desire which is invoked but not detailed. In the transition to the language of desire, the passage demonstrates the limits of strategies of externalizing representation for the purpose of depicting visionary moments. The vision of the visionary—the vision of a wonder—is shown to be a *veil* that, even as it vividly displays the scene between saint and eagle, does not allow access to the saint's interior experience of desire. Thomas further emphasizes the remainder of secrecy by not revealing the content of the divine secrets revealed to her. In other words, the passage

⁴⁴⁶ Although Aquinas agrees with the strict Augustinian position that all creation, having its source in the divine will, is a miracle—though one that does not often incite wonder due to its familiarity—Aquinas, in line with twelfth-century theorists like Adelard of Bath, opens a space for thinking about nature as an internally governed sphere with rules that are generally predictable, which providence can enter and disrupt in ways that are remarkable for their strangeness. On Augustine, see Benedicte Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000-1215*, p. 3-4. On Aquinas, see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), p. 121. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3.99.9. On the distinction between marvel and miracle, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. by Teresa L. Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 79.

makes explicit that as long as the reader is in the position *of reader*, he or she observes the saint from the outside; divine secrets remain unknown. The revelation of the text reinscribes the concealment of God and the text's inability to render the saint's relationship with the hidden God. The divine semiology of wonder has its root and end in a divine ineffability that limits the scope and capacity of hagiographical semiology.

A comparison with an account of another of Lutgard's raptures in II.23 further reveals the tension between inner states and their representation by means of physical signs, between veiling and concealment, in the sanctity of Lutgard. Thomas writes that "[w]henever she was rapt in spirit (*rapta in spiritu*), remembering the Lord's Passion," it seemed (*videbatur*) to Lutgard that her whole body was covered in blood. A "certain monastic priest" heard of this secret and decided to spy on her during a season—presumably Lent—when it was likely she would be contemplating the Passion. He saw her "leaning against a wall in contemplation" (*contemplatione*) (showing that rapture and contemplation are not strictly delineated in this *vita*), gleaming with blood that covered her face, hands, and hair. The priest, in an impoverished act of seizure paralleling Thomas's later reception of Lutgard's finger, "secretly" cut off a piece of her hair and "carried it in his hand to the light, where he marveled, astonished above all measure" (*cum supra modum attonitus miraretur*). When she returned to her senses (*revertente ad sensum*) the hair was no longer bloodied.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁷ "Quoties, rapta in spiritu, passionis Dominicæ memor erat; videbatur ei, quod essentialiter per totum corpus sanguine perfusa ruberet. Hoc cum quidam religiosus Presbyter secretius audivisset, observans eam tempore opportuno, quo dubium non erat, secundum tempus Christi fore memorem passionis; aggressus est illam videre: ubi acclinis ad parietem in contemplatione jacebat. Et ecce, vidit faciem ejus & manus, quæ tantum nudæ patebant, quasi recenti perfusas sanguine relucere: cincinnos vero ejus, quasi guttis noctium, infusos sanguine. Quod videns, clam forcipe partem illorum in partem tulit; & ad lucem eos in manu ferens, cum supra modum

Like I.15, this passage recounts a curious male witnessing a rapt female (who, in turn, witnesses in contemplation a wounded God), enabling the man to have a moderated vision and experience of great wonder and stupefaction corresponding to Lutgard's rapt state. The priest, compelled by the wondrous surface of her body, used Lutgard's external state—her bloodied body—to attain to an experience of wonder. He further sought a token of this external miracle as a means of further apprehending the marvel *and* proving—against his and presumably others' doubts—the reality of the miracle. The priest's experience was enabled by his acts of “observing” (*observans*) and “seeing” (*vidit*) the *spectaculum* of Lutgard's reclining figure. The visionary quality of his experience is further emphasized with the bold *ecce* introducing the introduction to his sight of Lutgard's marvelous body.⁴⁴⁸

However, the priest's *seeing* stands in contrast to Lutgard's experience of *seeming* (*videbatur*). Lutgard's contemplation seemed to her to involve her body becoming covered in blood, while in the priest's account, she was covered: this difference, I assert, shows Thomas attempting to articulate the interdependence of inner and outer in the visionary encounter, such that “*ex intellectuali enim consideratione mentis interius,*

attonitus miraretur, pia Lutgarde de raptu contemplationis ad sensum forinsecus revertente, cincinni quoque in manu stupentis ad colorem naturalem protinus revertuntur. Qui statim ultra quam credi potest, ad tam ingens spectaculum pavefactus, fere cecidit resupinus. Nota autem Lector, quod nimirum pia Lutgardis rubere sanguine visa est, quia de illis specialissime fuit in vita, qui laverunt stolas suas in sanguine Agni: ex intellectuali enim consideratione mentis interius, similitudinem traxit corpus exterius” (Col. 0249C-D).

⁴⁴⁸ The term pervades the Gospels, particularly miraculous events announced by angels such as those surrounding the Annunciation, including Gabriel's announcement to Zachariah of his muteness because of his disbelief in John's conception (*Et ecce eris tacens, et non poteris loqui usque in diem quo hæc fiant, pro eo quod non credidisti verbis meis, quæ implebuntur in tempore suo*) (Luke 1:20); Gabriel's announcement to Mary of her miraculous conception (*Ecce concipies in utero, et paries filium, et vocabis nomen ejus Jesum*) (Luke 1:31); and Mary and Elizabeth's greeting (*Ecce enim ut facta est vox salutationis tuæ in auribus meis, exsultavit in gaudio infans in utero meo*) (Luke 1:44).

similitudinem traxit corpus exterius.” The priest, seeking external evidence of Lutgard’s miraculous state and the means of realizing his own visionary experience, did not understand the play of internal and external, the observable and the seeming. His mistake was literalization. Therefore, when Lutgard returned from her visionary state and her hair returned to normal, he was deprived of both proof and his marvelous object. The priest thus becomes a figure for the witness whose sight rests on the veil of the marvelous body and yet never accesses the saint’s inner state. Unlike Thomas—who, in the experience recounted in I.15, transcends his position as witness by going out of his mind, hearing secrets that are not, in turn, communicated to readers—the priest remained firmly within the realm of the visible and linguistic. Furthermore, the priest is represented as a vaguely illicit voyeur, not unlike Lutgard’s earlier suitor, who hid outside the window of her house in order to catch a glimpse of her after taking note of (*observans*) the best time for such an encounter (I.2). The lack of mutuality in the vision of Book Two and the depiction of the rapt female, marked by a deep sense of her vulnerability to the godhead and to a man able to touch and remove a piece of her body by invading the cloistered space of contemplation, suggest reflection on the limits of the externalizing strategies of hagiographical representation and, I would suggest, a critique of such strategies as potentially exploitative and sexualized. The play between description and ineffability in I.15 is articulated in Book Two as the interdependence of inner and outer, as the outer is represented as dependent on the inner, yet unable to deliver to the witness a full experience of the saint’s inner reality. Just as description falters in the first vision, the external fails to deliver a full or lasting encounter with the internal.

The dynamic of the catatonic and prostrate woman overshadowed by a curious man makes this passage intensely disturbing. The passage reveals the continuity between female vulnerability, physical rape, and divine rapture that, as Dyan Elliott has shown, pervades later medieval texts. According to the humoral system, the male sex is hot and dry. Female softness and humidity were thought to make women more susceptible to certain vices like concupiscence, as well as predisposed to rapturous states.⁴⁴⁹ Rapture, located at the contested interstices of body and soul, is a “bodily production,” Elliott argues, hence its close etymological and structural connection to physical rape.⁴⁵⁰ Thomas understood the impressionable quality of Lutgard’s flesh, making her vulnerable not only to the predatory men in the world who would physically seize and rape her (see I.4, I.5, I.6) but to the male deity who would ravish her body, alienating her senses and possessing her by his overwhelming presence. Rapture, Elliott writes, “presupposes a heterosexual dynamic between a swooning female mystic and an overpowering male

⁴⁴⁹ Dyan Elliott, “The Physiology of Rapture,” in *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*, eds. P. Biller and A. Minnis (Rochester NY: York Medieval Press, 1997), pp. 157-8. These rapturous states could, of course, be induced by good or evil spiritual influence, although in the thirteenth-century, the issue of discretion was, according to Elliott, less fraught, as evidence for the source of such raptures was believed to be fairly easily read on the enrapt body, which bore obvious somatic signs. Elliott argues that Thomas was one of these thirteenth-century authorities who were casually optimistic about the possibility of interpreting the origins of an enrapt state (Elliott, “Physiology,” p. 151).

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142. Spiritual rapture (*raptus*) is derived from *rapire*, meaning to carry off by force, to seize, to ravish. It is synonymous with other terms like *excessus mentis*, *in spiritu*, *alienato mentis*, (Elliott, p. 143) or from the passage under consideration here, *stupefacta, capacitatem debilis aciei, amentem*.

deity.” Thus, Gerard of Liège describes God as the best rapist.⁴⁵¹ The curious priest is a poor recapitulation of the male deity who desires and overcomes the beloved woman.⁴⁵²

Elliott’s study demonstrates that in the late medieval period, some bodies—specifically, women’s—were understood to be predisposed to the kind of passivity and porosity (the opposite of the classical ideal of the sealed sensorium) required for the success of divine approach. Identification of women with the body paradoxically facilitated their detachment from the physical and sensible in moments of encounter with God. The externalizing impulse of hagiographical writing discussed in this chapter was applied to descriptions of rapt subjects, as the detachment from the body was perversely made visible by means of its bodily effects, including insensibility to pain or, as in the second passage considered here, the catatonia of trance states, enabling the body to act as proof for the saintly woman’s encounter with God.

There are, however, notable divergences between Thomas’s account of Lutgard’s rapture and Elliott’s analysis. These divergences complicate our understanding of

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., p. 161. See also Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), p. 286, n.20.

⁴⁵² Elliott’s essay does not consider the theorization of rapture as it appeared before the high medieval period. Early Christian and Byzantine theologians developed multiple theories and phenomenologies of rapture, which extensively theorized the passivity and helplessness incurred by the abstraction of the senses in the face of an overpowering divine other, as well as the status of the intellect and the relation between the intellect and body in the state of rapture.

The exemplary enraptured figure of the Christian tradition is not a woman. Rather, it is the Apostle Paul, who left a richly ambiguous account in II Corinthians 12:2-7 of being “caught up” (*raptum*) to the third heaven, “whether in the body (*in corpore*) or out of the body (*extra corpus*) I know not, God knows.” The Latin *raptum* renders the Greek, ἀρπαγέντα, which like the verb *rapire*, connotes being seized and carried off by force. Paul thus describes his experience with the same language of violence and helplessness that Elliott finds prevalent in descriptions of later medieval women’s raptures. However, in Paul’s case, the status of his body is in question, as his account implies that his body could have accompanied him to the third heaven. Due to Paul’s ambiguous yet authoritative report, the status of the body in states of rapture remained an open question, receiving different treatments throughout the history of Christianity.

medieval notions of rapture as well as Thomas's representation of Lutgard and his experience of her.

First, the encounter outlined in I.15 subverts the passive position typically associated with women's spiritual and corporeal formation. Lutgard's porosity and vulnerability to God ultimately places her in a position of Thomas's teacher (aligning her with the activity of the divine eagle), schooling him with "decisive" thought derived from her encounter with the eagle. In terms of the expectations of her gender outlined by Elliott, Lutgard's capacities are *augmented* and not only intensified by this rapturous experience insofar as her porosity, passivity, and silence ultimately issue in forceful speech. That Thomas chooses not to represent her porousness by means of a wounded, suffering, or bleeding body here further emphasizes her intellectual capacities. Second, it is *Thomas* who recounts his experience in the violent terms typical of rapture discourse, for he is forced by her speech into a position of passivity—"held" or "mastered" (*tenuisset*) and "rendered mad" (*reddidisset amentem me*). Like Lutgard, Thomas's capacities are augmented through an encounter with an ineffable alterity. His augmentation occurs not through supplementation but through the loss and humiliation of his intellectual and linguistic powers. In the terms of Elliott's argument, Lutgard is masculinized by her vision while Thomas is feminized. Thomas's description of his feminization depicts it as an experience both deeply desired and frightening (and, perhaps, desired because frightening), as her words are "sweet" (*dulcis*) and yet render him mad (*amentem*) and almost annihilated (*extinctum*). Thomas thus undergoes a loss of his intellectual capacities.

This loss of intellectual prowess is present in earlier important texts, most notably Pseudo-Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, which describes an experience of "ecstasy" that emphasizes the role of the divestment of the intellect and sensory perception in the soul's ascent to divine union. The treatise begins with the following advice for Timothy:

Timothy, my friend, my advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things, is to leave behind [*apoleipe*] you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside [*agnostos*], to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment [*ektasei*] of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all [*panta aphelon kai ek panton apolutheis*], you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is.⁴⁵³

In seeking a "sight of mysterious things," Timothy must abandon his faculties and categories and thereby paradoxically attain to a stance of utter passivity in which he is "uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow." By means of this divestment, Pseudo-Dionysius promises, Timothy will suffer ecstasy (*ti...heautou...ektasei*). Sight, intellect, and knowledge—all things that fasten a person to their particular body, history, perception, and agency—prevent union with the unknown God. This account of the shedding of the perceptual and sensible in mystical ascent stands in the lineage of the approach to the mysteries (*musteria*) in Greek mystery religions. From the injunction that initiates keep silent about that which they encountered (*muein*) developed the notion that attainment of mystical "knowledge" of the divine required an initiate to close all their senses. Thus "mystical knowledge" in the classical Greek context was understood to be "knowledge available only to the mind or spirit that is as detached as possible from

⁴⁵³ *On Mystical Theology*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: The Complete Works*, trans. by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 1.1 997B-1000A. Henceforth *MT*.

bodily concerns.”⁴⁵⁴ Sealing soul from body, the initiate became capable of experiencing unbodily mysteries. Like the experience described for Timothy, Thomas undergoes a shedding of his intellectual power and is thereby rendered passive and ecstatic. Unlike the ascent described in the *Mystical Theology*, however, Thomas’s account is inflected with a heterosexual dynamic and passionate language of madness and forceful confinement that typically marked late medieval descriptions of rapture.

Thomas and the Male Search for Visionary Experience

In John Coakley’s study of late-medieval male-authored *vitae* of medieval women, he argues that the hagiographies reveal much not only about what men thought of the holy women they sought to represent, but also about what they thought about themselves.⁴⁵⁵ These men often acted as confessors as well as hagiographers, and the intimate relationship between holy woman and male admirer was revelatory of male aspirations, desires, and anxiety.⁴⁵⁶ Coakley takes up Caroline Walker Bynum’s argument that the physicality of the piety of later medieval women (putatively marked by extreme *ascesis* and ecstatic raptures) was both theologically significant and intrinsically gendered insofar as their piety was an enactment of an identification with the suffering Christ. This

⁴⁵⁴ Grace Jantzen, “Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics,” in *Hypatia* vol. 9 no. 4 (Autumn, 1994), p. 188.

⁴⁵⁵ John W. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 3.

⁴⁵⁶ Thomas was not Lutgard’s confessor. He notes another man, Bernard, fulfilled this task. She was, instead, his ‘spiritual mother,’ acting as a giver of advice and in many ways confessing Thomas, as when he went to her with the temptations he faced as a result of becoming a confessor.

identification was made possible by and a function of their femaleness. The porosity, vulnerability, and nurturing nature presumed to inhere in female flesh enabled women to easily identify with the humiliated, bleeding, and nourishing crucified God. Thus, the qualities that marginalized women socially and politically as the inferior, weaker sex were redeployed in the late medieval religious context as means of privilege and authority, including the capacity for greater mystical powers as celebrated in thirteenth-century hagiography.⁴⁵⁷ The New Testament paradox that the weak are exalted, the last are first, so celebrated in movements inspired by the *vita apostolica* in the twelfth century, takes on an explicitly gendered nature in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁴⁵⁸

It is important to remember that women's *own* writings of this period often display either a resistance to or disinterest in the construction of female piety through the lens of corporeality. This fact demonstrates that the male hagiographical representations of holy women are a discourse of female sanctity created by male fantasy and culturally dominant ideologies about and expectations for women, a point that can be elided in the work of Bynum and Coakley, which tends to accept the hagiographical documents as

⁴⁵⁷ John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*, p. 10. For Bynum's elaboration of this argument, see *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 261-8; *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 151-79. Dyan Elliott is less sanguine about the implications and status of the privileges women accrued through this identification. She argues that while this marriage of femaleness and bodiliness enabled new formulations of the relation of body and soul and attributions of various talents, particularly of mystical powers to women, the marriage was not a happy one and necessarily culminated in the fifteenth-century witch hunts ("Physiology," p. 141, p. 167).

⁴⁵⁸ Thomas Aquinas explicitly argues that woman's flawed nature also made her more humble and thus an embodiment of the New Testament ideal of "the last shall be first" (Elliott, p. 160).

revelatory of women's actual practices.⁴⁵⁹ However, Coakley's work can helpfully show us male hagiographers' *constructions* of the women about whom they write.

Coakley argues that one sees in the male-authored *vitae* a need to control and order female piety, as well as a desire for what the men themselves feel they lack spiritually. Ensclosed in the comforts and authority of their clerical office, the privileged male cleric obtained a certain connection to the divine by the virtue of his office but that this position often undermined the realization of an affective connection or intimate relationship with the deity, for his privilege meant that he was not participating in the gospel admonition to be humble in imitation of Christ.⁴⁶⁰ Coakley hypothesizes that the male admirers of holy women obtained vicarious access to this realm of affective connection with God that was inaccessible (or at least problematic) for them through their relation to and writing about women who, in the stories they told, were able to more easily realize such a kinship with divinity. The hagiographers studied by Coakley were thus deeply invested in maintaining the gender alterity of the women about whom they wrote, for this difference paradoxically served to enable the man to achieve a relation to the divine similar to that enjoyed by the women they wrote of. The otherness of woman repeated, in a new register, the otherness of God. In their hagiographies, Coakley writes, authors such as Thomas did not perform symbolic reversal by

⁴⁵⁹ See Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 45-52, for her discussion of the radical divergence between Beatrice of Nazareth's autobiographical account of her spiritual life and its "translation" by her male hagiographer, who renders her narrative in physical terms that literalize her description of the spiritual life. See also the discussion of Marguerite Porete's resistance to the centrality of bodily and emotional works in the religious life and in dominant theological models of the thirteenth century, pp. 105-107.

⁴⁶⁰ John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*, p. 2.

applying female imagery to themselves...but rather...[by] encountering real embodiments of the female, who retained an otherness both symbolic and literal. Through that otherness, the women signified to these men the presence of the divine...Unable to experience it through their own ecclesiastical office or theological expertise, they found it only outside themselves, in the women, those opposite creatures to whom they happily had access, who lacked their office or schooled knowledge they possessed, and possessed the charismatic gifts they lacked.”⁴⁶¹

The effectiveness of the relationship, from the male point of view, relied on maintaining the otherness of the holy woman. Her strangeness was key to the encounter with the otherness of God, by whose alterity the female mystic was overthrown in a rapturous encounter.

Coakley’s argument cannot account for the myriad of male clerics who spoke of experiences of union with a divine other through means other than relationships with humble female counterparts, including Thomas’s fellow Dominicans Meister Eckhart (d. 1327), Henry Suso (d. 1366), and Johannes Tauler (d. 1361). However, in the case of Thomas of Cantimpré, it seems that his relationship with a holy woman and writing of that relationship was a vital means for Thomas to realize the potentialities of his spiritual vocation as a person seeking union with a divine Other and as hagiographer. Importantly, the full realization of Thomas’s imitation of Lutgard’s encounter with divine ineffability does not occur, I argue, until he turns to *us*, his readers, in his account of the two ecstasies. The writing of hagiography—and its failure—is essential to the fulfillment of his vocation as devotee and describer of the holy woman. The mystical hagiography becomes Thomas’s version of a mystical practice, a vital performance of the experience he has in conversation with Lutgard. Only in writing his account can Thomas’s desire be

⁴⁶¹ John Coakley, “Friars as confidants of holy women in Medieval Dominican Hagiography,” in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, eds. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 225.

“extended” in a way that doubles the *extensum desiderio* Lutgard enjoyed in her vision. In order to realize such an extension of desire in his writing, Thomas must preserve the alterity Coakley argues is an essential component of the Friars’ relation to holy women.

In chapter four, I described Thomas’s intense desire for Lutgard’s finger, of his need to have a trace of her bodily presence to hold and linger over after her death. In trading book for finger, the *vita* makes text and saintly body figures of each other; Thomas’s book becomes the relic the abbess Hadewijch desires and that readers linger over, searching for the presence of the dead woman. However, Thomas’s intense desire for a relic of his spiritual mother not only impels the writing of the text but is also performed in the scripting of the *Life*. The ineffability *topos* functions as an important part of the mechanism by which this infinite extension of desire is realized in the writing, acting not only as a rhetorical convention but as a *performative means* of realizing and replicating an experience of rapture. In the space of writing, the hagiographer can reach for the representational replication of the desired holy woman, even as he textualizes his inability to complete this project. Thus, while he ultimately wins her finger by writing her *vita*, in I.15, Thomas delivers his reading and writing of the sign, Lutgard, over to a confession of the failure of both his text and his incapacity to render fully what he perceives, or even his capacity to perceive its full splendor. Thomas desires to make Lutgard present in the text, to make her palpable, graspable, comprehensible, but he must also textualize the ways she escapes such rendering in order to make possible his own mystical vision, a vision of ineffability which in turn verifies Lutgard’s holiness. His failure to apprehend Lutgard, being “so astonished by the subtlety of her words that, had that sweet and ineffable wonderment held me any longer, it would either have rendered

me mad or utterly destroyed me,” not only enables him to maintain the alterity that Coakley argues is necessary for the male admirer’s attainment of what he lacks, but enacts an *imitation* of Lutgard’s own experience of ineffability in her moment of rapture, when she experienced a “wonderment exceeding any words to describe it.”

Apophysis and Exemplarity

Thomas preserves a central lacuna in his account, namely, the precise nature of Lutgard’s subtle words. Just as the eagle delivered its message to Lutgard alone, so Thomas became the sole recipient of Lutgard’s divine insights. The *vita*, whose stated aim in the Prologue is to provide a model (*exemplum*) of the ideal life, remains silent on its heroine’s most sublime teachings. The text fails to provide either an exemplary lesson for the reader derived from Lutgard’s experience or an opportunity for the reader to be astonished by Lutgard’s words for Thomas. The reader is left with a lovely description of the eagle and Thomas’s declaration that these events occurred as he tells them, but the text does not communicate the effect those events had on Thomas. Thomas thus preserves both Lutgard’s singularity and his own. The privacy of their two conversations—first with the eagle, which occurs in the intimacy of the bridal mouth-to-mouth and in his later *collationes* with her—remains uninterrupted, unexposed to readers and therefore incapable of their application. Here the exemplary function of hagiography, which requires a turn to the generalizable and universal principle, breaks on the shores of a rocky singularity, which Thomas’s practice of writing, seeking to maintain and extend desire, must preserve. The silence of the passage is both a function of Thomas’s sought-

after astonishment and a means of preserving it in the text; it maintains the dynamic of revelation and concealment, revealing that it conceals.

Thus, we witness a shift from the discussion in the previous chapter of experience and its transformations through practices of reading. In the passages considered in chapter four, Lutgard, in a continuation of the Cassianic tradition, becomes the bride by her assimilation to the biblical narrative in a contemplative practice of “taking up” the position of Solomon’s bride, a position the reader is encouraged to adopt through her own reading of the *vita* and the Song. However, in the situation of astonishment that is modeled in I.15, such a structure of imitability and appropriated experience breaks down. The *vita* seems to present a double message about reading, imitation, and exemplarity. In I.15, Thomas models the kind of imitative response to the exemplary figure we would expect from our reading of Cassian and William of St. Thierry; he mirrors Lutgard’s ecstasy, stepping into the stream of her experience when she pours her words into his mouth as the eagle did hers. It is, however, highly unclear from this passage how the next level in the imitative chain is reached. Thomas’s inability (or refusal) to repeat Lutgard’s words undermines the text’s promise to provide access to the perfect life. How does the thematization of the failure to represent the saint’s most “memorable” or powerful words (at least in terms of their effect on Thomas) correspond with the Prologue’s promise to be truthful and exhaustive as possible to provide a suitably complex didactic model? In placing Thomas between Lutgard and the reader, is the text suggesting that the reader imitate Thomas or Lutgard? If so, how would that be possible, given his preservation of the privacy of their conversation, which is in effect Thomas’s refusal to share the saint with readers?

While the act of reading and the concomitant transformation of experience (designed to facilitate the growth of desire and an encounter with God as the beloved) is proffered as a model elsewhere in the *vita*, I.15 makes exemplary an experience of astonishment that manifests in the failure of transmission. What is read does not offer a model for the reader to imitate. This very failure, which protects the privacy and the singularity of Lutgard's and Thomas's visionary experiences, results from that sought-after astonishment, which, I have argued, Thomas perpetuates in his narrative for the purpose of extending his desire in imitation of Lutgard. By placing silence around and at the center of his story, his writing of mystical hagiography re-performs the desire awakened by the ineffable that Thomas witnesses in Lutgard's vision. Thomas's act of imitation leads to his own inimitability. Thomas's failure to describe what he has heard is continuous with his enactment of the ineffability *topos* and the logic of apophatic texts, more broadly: were the divine face describable or Lutgard's words less than rapture-inducing, they would not be able to do their astonishing work.

In an important passage in Book Three (III.9), however, Thomas seems to alter the strategy pursued in I.15 with regard to ineffable mystical experience, imitation, and singularity. The passage opens with Lutgard relating to an "intimate friend" what she saw when she saw Christ's face.⁴⁶² It thus would seem to document precisely what we are not shown in I.15. According to Thomas, she relates:

[a]n indescribable brilliance (*splendor inaestimabilis*) appears to me in an instant, and I see an ineffable beauty (*ineffabilem pulchritudinem*) of his glorified being like a flash of lightening. Were this vision not to pass

⁴⁶² Although the eagle in I.15 is identified with John the Evangelist, it was also a common symbol for Christ, who, according to some bestiaries, as one with eyes as strong as the eagle, alone can look directly at God.

quickly from the gaze of my contemplation, I would not be able to endure it and remain alive (*vita praesenti hanc sustinere non possem*). After this flash, there remains an intellectual brilliance (*splendor intellectualis*), and when in that brilliance I seek the one I had seen for an instant, I cannot find him (III.9).⁴⁶³

Thomas immediately turns to the reader with the exhortatory “nota ergo, lector,” offering a biblical proof from the Song of Songs that makes explicit the allusions to the Song in both I.15 and this passage. Thomas quotes 5:6, “My soul melted when my beloved spoke; I sought him and found him not; I called and he did not answer me.” He then offers a gloss on the passage, giving an account of desire through the figure of the ever-wandering bride, concluding with a memorable summary rhyme, *ut tanto diligentius quaerat, quanto ardentius amat; & tanto ad possidendum mens latior praeparetur, quanto ad quaerendum frequentius innovatur* (“Thus the more diligently the soul seeks him, the more ardently it loves him, and the more thoroughly the mind prepares itself to possess him, the more frequently it is renewed to seek him”).

The silence that is absolute in I.15 is here pursued and somewhat subdued by the biblical passage and its implicit interpretive contextualization in a biblical frame. If we read III.9 as filling the silences of I.15, it could seem to undermine my reading of I.15 as a thematization of the failure of representation that re-performs the ineffability of Lutgard’s visions, for the descriptions of III.9 provide a detailed account of astonishment that captures the vision in language and thus provides a concrete model for all readers to imitate. However, while III.9 describes Lutgard’s vision according to tropes popular

⁴⁶³ “In momento, inquit, apparet mihi splendor inæstimabilis, & quasi fulgur video ejus ineffabilem pulchritudinem glorificationis: quæ nisi raptim transiret ab aspectu contemplationis meæ; cum vita præsentis hanc sustinere non possem. Post hunc vero fulgorem splendor intellectualis manet; & cum in ipso splendore quæro quem raptim videram, non invenio” (Col. 0258B-D).

among Cistercian writers, what it ultimately describes—as Thomas’s description of his experience upon hearing Lutgard’s words—is an encounter in which she is nearly killed by a vision of “ineffable beauty” too intense for mortal beings. The descriptions of III.9 thus reiterate the ineffability *topos* and thematize the failure of the text to articulate or capture a divine vision. In III.9, however, the thematization of failure is elaborated through scriptural discourse of desire rather than a performance of narrative silence. In both passages the problematic of apophasis and exemplarity—of how the unrepresentable can be communicated—is operative and called into question.

While Thomas and Lutgard believe that she will contemplate Christ with an “unveiled face” after death, as Thomas glosses Lutgard’s experience in III.9, in this life the breach between infinite and finite entail a state in which the soul, in the presence (*repraesentare*) of Christ’s infinite goodness, wisdom, and virtue is made painfully aware (it “measures,” *metiatur*) of the gap between its nature and divinity, a gap that is the condition of its desiring:

What else is it for Christ to speak in the soul except to make present (*repraesentare*) to it the riches of his goodness, wisdom, and beauty? From these riches let the soul measure how good, how deliciously wise, and how beautifully adorned with virtues one must be to deserve his love in perpetual charity. When the soul hears his voice, it melts with desire (*liquescit in desideriiis*) and strives to obtain what it has glimpsed (*conspicit*), but since the time of perfect vision has not yet come, it suddenly loses him whom it held as if he were present (*quasi praesentem*) (III.9).⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶⁴ “Quid est Christum loqui in anima, nisi repraesentare illi suae divitias bonitatis, sapientiae, & decoris? Ut ex his metiatur anima, quam bonum, quamque sapide sapientem, & a virtutibus decoratum eum esse oporteat, qui ejus amorem poterit in caritate perpetua promereri. Hunc ergo audiens anima liquescit in desideriiis, & nititur obtinere quem conspicit: sed quia tempus perfectae visionis nondum venit, illum quem quasi praesentem habuit, subito perdit” (Col. 0258D-E).

According to Thomas, the enraptured soul sees not the face of Christ but the re-presentations (or “quasi-presences”) of divine goodness, wisdom, and charity. The soul’s awareness of the gap between itself and God opens the dynamic of pursuit, union, and loss. In Thomas’s telling no experience of divinity is an experience of God as such, only experience of the gap between the soul and the ineffable beauty that threatens to destroy it. Awareness of this gap, once “measured,” astonishes, leaving a “brilliance” that “infinitely darkens” the light of the sun of the mind, a darkness that renews the soul’s search for God. What the soul experiences in rapture is not an overwhelming moment of annihilation in pure divine presence but an experience of the soul’s *lack* of charity, wisdom, and virtue, the very qualities that God “represents” to the soul. It is an astonishing humiliation.

The rapturous condition detailed by Thomas’s gloss in III.9 accords with his account of *his* experience of astonishment in I.15. He describes this condition as one in which wonderment at divine perfection exposes the soul’s deficiencies to the visionary. Thus, astonishment occurs through an experience of radical alterity that both humiliates and stimulates desire. The appropriation of such an ideal state by way of imitation is tremendously complex for the reader of either I.15 or III.9. This is so for two reasons: because the astonishment described in III.9 and modeled by Thomas in I.15 arises through an experience of a lack; and because that lack manifests through encounter with a reality so much greater than the self that it can be experienced only as ineffable. This ineffability is essential to its astonishing effects; were it assimilable by the mind, its alterity subdued, it would not have its necessarily humiliating effect.

As this ineffable alterity by which the subject is humiliated is by definition indescribable, it begs the question of how one might *teach* it. In fact, apophatic texts such as *The Mystical Theology* and *The Cloud of Unknowing* have a long history as advice manuals, written by master to disciple: a highly esoteric theology that protests the need for protection by the *disciplina arcani* presented in a pragmatic genre defined by its didactic purpose. The exemplarism of mystical hagiography is therefore continuous with other genres of apophatic texts, particularly the advice letter. However, hagiography requires the externalization of internal states in order to render the saint vividly for readers. Thus, while the *VLA* proposes an experience of astonishment as exemplary, it also presses against the possibility of teaching or transmitting the ineffable.

Conclusion

In the first passage considered in this chapter, I.15, the image offered as a model for imitation or edification remains “unsaid.” Thomas’s hagiographical discourse edifies by constructing an image that the reader can imitate then effaces this image with recourse to an extensive use of the ineffability topos. This effacement destabilizes both the representation of the saintly figure *and* the one who regards her. Thomas’s use of the ineffability *topos* thus serves to implicate him in the writing of the saint’s Life. The *topos* enables his act of composition to become an imitation of Lutgard’s ineffable experience of God and a performative means for the extension of his desire in the act of composing the *vita*.

The silences at the heart of Thomas’s depiction of Lutgard’s encounter with God and Thomas’s encounter with Lutgard render these secret conversations unavailable to

readers, interrupting the text's transmission of exemplary moments. This silence—a function of the ineffability *topos*—preserves the singularity of Lutgard's visionary status. While this singularity questions the limits of exemplarity, as Thomas glosses it in a later passage (III.9), the singularity of the saint, like that of God, is the source of her alterity, an alterity that becomes in turn a means of saintly exemplarity. In III.9, Thomas articulates the relationship between ineffability and exemplarity as a function of recognizing and measuring the gap between the soul and God, a recognition that humiliates and astonishes.

The passages addressed in this chapter also function as a critique of the externalizing techniques of hagiographical representation. Lutgard's and Thomas's visions in Book One, the experience of a "certain monastic priest" in Book Two, and Lutgard's description of rapture in Book Three focus on the phantasmatic nature of the visionary encounter. The images perceived in these moments are named "quasi-presences," experiences of "seeming," or as so brilliant that the eye and language cannot contain their sight. Thomas foregrounds the spiritual nature of visionary encounter in these passages. As a result, the body and, therefore, language, must be effaced, revealed as "quasi-presences" that can never fully deliver up the vision—whether of God or saint—to the witness. These passages thus call attention to the *surfaces* of hagiographical writing, the lineaments of body and deed that cannot ultimately deliver the saint's interior state to the reader. The more seriously that Thomas takes the spiritual claims of Lutgard's religiosity, the more his seeing is haunted by its seeming, and the more the hagiographer (and his readers) is shown to resemble a "certain monastic priest," clinging to a proof that vanishes.

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